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Dissertation

GEORGE MEREDITH'S PROSE FICTION
IN THE LIGHT OF HIS THEORY
OF COMEDY

By

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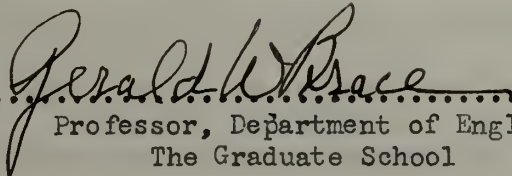
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FOREWORD

The purpose of the following dissertation is to make a critical and analytical study of George Meredith's prose fiction considered in the light of his own theory of comedy and the uses of the comic spirit with a view to determining the extent and scope to which Meredith applies his theories practically to his own writing. To this end the method of investigation is necessarily chronological in order to establish a complete perspective concerning Meredith's logical artistic development. The dissertation proper will be preceded by a brief section devoted to a survey of the comic tradition in English fiction so that Meredith's position may be more clearly defined by means of comparison and contrast. This does not mean, however, that any attempt will be made, except incidentally, to trace literary influences upon Meredith. The chief emphasis in the dissertation proper is centered upon Meredith's own writing activities and his natural consequent growth in creative artistry. The main sources, therefore, of investigation are primarily Meredith's original works. A great deal of criticism has been evoked by controversial problems to be found in the pages of Meredith's fiction, and this has not been ignored in assembling the material for this piece of work. The various critics have been considered carefully and their opinions and judgments weighed and balanced proportionally. The conclusions arrived at in this dissertation, however, are completely independent and original.

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BRIEF SURVEY OF THE COMIC TRADITION IN ENGLISH FICTION

Uses of Comedy in Drama. One of the earliest manifestations of comedy in English fiction is to be found in the mediaeval miracle and mystery plays which, though Biblical in origin, presented realistic scenes from actual life and gradually introduced every day comic characters of the lower types: quack doctors, servants, sheep stealers, scolding wives, and the like. Comedy was not developed as a separate form of drama at this early stage, but was introduced into otherwise serious performances incidentally as pure comic relief. In a play like Noah or The Second Shepherd's Play the comedy consists of scenes that are drawn along broad, coarse lines not unlike the conception of comedy laid down by Aristotle in his famous definition in which he stipulates that comedy is an imitation of characters of a lower type and must present some defect or ugliness which, though ludicrous, is neither painful nor destructive.¹

This same type of realistic low comedy persists long after the disappearance of the mediaeval miracle and mystery plays and their successor, the morality play which specializes in the Devil and the Vice as its chief comic outlet. In the interlude we can begin to see the development of comedy not only from the point of view of pure farce with an almost French tinge but also with a strong suggestion of an element of satire. In John Heywood's interlude called The Four P's the clergy comes

1 Smith and Parks, The Great Critics, p. 8. Quoted from S. H. Butcher's translation of Aristotle's Poetics.

in for its share of satire, and in John, Tib and Sir John the ordinary hen-pecked husband is held up to ridicule in a fashion that is far from subtle.

A similar form of lampooning comedy is found in the first two full length comedies - Ralph Roister Doister¹ and Gammer Gurton's Needle which depend for their comic effect largely on the stock characters derived from the academic drama of Plautus. Intrigue and mystery enter in full force supported by braggadocios and parasites whose brand of humor, childish in many respects, is yet distinguished by occasional flashes of real wit and verbal ingenuity.

English comedy never succeeds in emancipating itself fully from the stigma of puns and quick repartee- a variety of verbal fireworks that seems to prove a source of perennial entertainment. The refinement of comedy is a later development of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought about by the help of such notable playwrights as Lyly, Peele and Greene. Grossness and vulgarity gradually give way to a pleasanter form of wit, which, though artificial and bombastic, is nevertheless a lively and welcome change from the heavy-handed humor which preceded it.

A distinct contribution to the development of comedy is made by Ben Jonson whose conscious elaboration of the "humours" theory produces a type of realistic comic character with a tendency toward exaggeration and caricature. Ben Jonson is unwittingly the instigator of the school of Smollett and Dickens in his daring attempts to overwhelm vice with moral indignation and riotous laughter. His Volpone is perhaps his most

1 Legouis, A Short History of English Literature, p. 76. The author, Nicholas Udall professes that his moral aim is to satirize boasters, but his chief aim is to amuse, for "mirth," he says, "prolongeth life and causeth health."

effective attack upon a vice that deserves open exposure.¹ Jonson exploits the realm of pure intellectual comedy and thus paves the way for later satirists who specialize in the analysis of social abuses. His cool intellectual detachment and his stinging denunciation of the social parvenu is almost like an anticipation of the Meredithian variety of comedy.

Although Shakespeare never adopts the current fad for "humour" comedies, he does poke fun at them gently in such characters as the nimble and light-fingered Nym or the pedantic Fluellen in *Henry IV*, but these are mere hints and not fully developed satiric portraits. Shakespeare never aims at reform alone, though he exposes folly wherever he finds it. He is not concerned to cure it but is satisfied with exposure and then goes gaily on to explore realms of romantic adventure. It is to be noted in passing that Shakespeare is not above making a liberal use of low comedy: in fact a large share of uproarious merriment is furnished by his rustic clowns who caper convincingly even in the midst of a high comedy like Much Ado About Nothing. One of the best examples of Shakespeare's temperate and tolerant use of comedy as satire is Twelfth Night where folly, vanity, and self esteem are subjects for laughter but not for scorn.

Under the capable direction of Beaumont and Fletcher a synthesis is effected between tragedy and comedy, and comedy, as such, is looked upon as mere entertainment in the full romantic sense of the word. Comedy is no longer considered an instrument of reform or a means of idealizing

1 For Jonson's lighter side, compare the Prologue to Everyman in His Humour: "Comedy . . . would show an image of the times, and sport with human follies not with crimes."

life. The combination of satire and pure farce to be found in The Knight of The Burning Pestle is a rare survival of one of the original impulses of comedy and illustrates perfectly Sir Philip Sidney's dictum that "comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life . . . represented in the most ridiculous or scornfull sort that may be."¹

Later Elizabethan comedy, with its prevailing tone of cynicism and smartness, marks a falling off from the earlier spirit of forthright sincerity, and foreshadows the sophisticated artificiality of Restoration Comedy. Dramatists like Middleton, Massinger, and Shirley manage to produce a weird hodge podge of tragi-comedy with a liberal sprinkling of fantastic and gruesome horror thrown in for additional good measure. Ushered in in such inauspicious fashion, Restoration Comedy continues the emphasis on wit and sarcasm, and, as Leigh Hunt says, specializes in "heartless fine ladies and gentlemen . . . buzzing in a maze of intrigue."² Even Charles Lamb, who professes an amiable weakness for what he calls the "artificial comedy of the last century", has to admit that in general Restoration Comedy has not only "excluded faultless characters but any pretensions to goodness or good feelings whatever."³ Yet in spite of his unusual critical severity, he insists on maintaining that the corrupting influence of Restoration Comedy has been greatly overrated.⁴

1 Quoted from An Apologie for Poetrie in Smith and Parks, The Great Critics, p. 165.

2 Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar, Dramatic Works, edited by Leigh Hunt. Preface. p. XXIX.

3 Ibid., p. LXVI.

4 Lamb, The Essays of Elia, p. 212. "I confess for myself I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict confidence . . . to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions . . . I come back to my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it."

Meredith himself devotes considerable attention to the subject of Restoration Comedy which he condemns as thoroughly decadent and degenerate. The one exception that he allows is Congreve's The Way of the World, which is not only an exception to all the other comedies of the period, but to "his own among them, by virtue of the remarkable brilliancy of the writing, and the figure of Millamant."¹ But Meredith goes on to say that the play has "no idea in it, beyond the stale one that so the world goes; and it concludes with the jaded discovery of a document at a convenient season for the descent of the curtain."² And as for the heroine, "charming Millamant," though Meredith enjoys her wit and brilliance, he feels that she is too artificial and has no real humanity³ - a rather curious bit of criticism coming from the creator of Diana Warwick.

Meredith attacks Farquhar's The Beaux Stratagem with particular zeal, condemning it as more farce than real comedy: "its wit is like steam in an engine; it vanishes when she has reached her terminus, never troubling the brains afterward."⁴ This comment is of special interest in view of Hazlitt's defense of the same play which he praises as "lively and bustling, full of point and interest." Possibly the best defense that could be given to a play of this sort, is found in Farquhar's own Prologue to The Beaux' Stratagem in which he shows a keen awareness of the social significance of the value of satire:

1 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and The Uses of The Comic Spirit, p. 97.

2 Ibid., p. 97.

3 Ibid., p. 84.

4 Ibid., p. 81.

5 Hazlitt, Lectures on The English Comic Writers, p. 88.

When strife disturbs, or sloth corrupts an age,
 Keen satire is the business of the stage.
 Follies to-night we show ne'er lashed before,
 Yet such as nature shows you every hour;
 Nor can the picture give a just offence,
 For fools are made for jests to men of sense.¹

The decline in English comedy after Farquhar may be partly attributed to the political and moral changes of the period, represented by the virtuous Jeremy Collier who in Hazlitt's opinion at least "spoiled the stage by pretending to reform it and . . . did much mischief by encouraging lack-a-daisical, whining, make-believe comedies in the next age such as Steele's The Conscious Lovers."² The swift descent of comedy into sentimentality is deplored by Professor Bernbaum in his book on The Drama of Sensibility in which he prefers Wycherley's honestly ironic exposure of hypocrisy in The Double Dealer with its logical ridicule at the expense of folly and vice to Goldsmith's timid attempts at satire in The Good-Natured Man where his "comic muse is not a social satirist but a merry jade who descends to practical jokes."³ In fact Professor Bernbaum goes so far as to declare that "to write true comedy in a wholly good-natured mood seems to me as impossible as to write true tragedy in an optimistic one."⁴

1 Wycherley, Congreve, Vanburgh, and Farquhar, Dramatic Works, edited by L. Hunt, p. 641.

2 Hazlitt, Lectures on The English Comic Writers, p. 89.

3 Bernbaum, The Drama of Sensibility, p. 245. Cf. Hazlitt, Lectures on The English Comic Writers, p. 164 - for a somewhat similar point of view - in which The Good-Natured Man is criticized as a "whimsical effusion . . . a delightful caricature rather than a real comedy."

4 Bernbaum, The Drama of Sensibility, p. 272. Cf. p. 257-with its thrust at Sheridan, whose School for Scandal is criticized for sentimental tendencies and failure to maintain a consistently comic point of view.

Development of Comedy in the Novel. Although there are some few scattered evidences of comedy in English fiction prior to the eighteenth century, no actual theory of comedy is formulated and applied before the time of Fielding. His consciously elaborate theory of the comic prose epic is proof of his constant preoccupation with the important position of comedy in his own novels. As a matter of fact his career as a novelist was inaugurated with Joseph Andrews, which had as its initial impulse the aim of parodying the sentimental, nonsensical aspects of Pamela. In his Essay on Comedy Meredith remarks that the "look of Fielding upon Richardson is essentially comic." His method of correcting the sentimental writer is a mixture of the comic and the humorous. Parson Adams is a creation of humour."¹ True enough, the good Parson is an illustration of humorous rather than pure comic treatment, for he is universally loved because of his kindly amiability: indeed in some respects he approaches dangerously near the level of sentimentality--as Fielding admits when he says he is designed as a character of "perfect simplicity . . . the goodness of whose heart will recommend him to the good-natured."²

And yet there is a touch of pure comedy in the description of the episode in which Parson Adams indulges in a long exhortation on the desirability of Stoic self-control in the face of grief or disaster. He is seriously advising Joseph never to give way to private feelings when

1 Meredith, Essay on Comedy, p. 135.

2 Fielding, The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and His Friend, Mr. Abraham Adams, Preface, p. XLIV.

news is brought that his youngest son has just been drowned.¹ Silenced for a moment by the news, he soon begins to "stamp about the room and deplore his loss with the bitterest agony."² Joseph tries in vain to apply the Parson's own arguments, but he is "not at leisure to hearken to his advice."³ In the midst of his bitter lamentation, the child comes running in very wet, but very much alive, and in no time at all Parson Adams' joy is as extravagant as his grief had been before: "he dances about the room like one frantic . . . and when the tumults are over, he takes Joseph aside and continues, 'No, Joseph, do not give way too much to thy passions, if thou dost expect happiness'".⁴ But Joseph's patience is quite gone, and he perceives sadly that it is easier to "give advice than take it."⁵

In his Preface to Joseph Andrews, Fielding considers carefully the distinction between comedy and burlesque, and decides that since burlesque is "ever the exhibition of what is monstrous and unnatural", he prefers to adhere to comedy because it confines itself "strictly to nature, from the just imitation of which will flow all the pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible reader."⁶ Having thus established as his province the Ridiculous, he goes on to discuss the subject further:

1 Ibid., Bk. IV, Chapter VIII, p. 343.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Fielding, Joseph Andrews, p. 344.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., Preface, p. XXXVII.

The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation. But though it arises from one spring only, when we consider the infinite streams into which this one branches, we shall presently cease to admire at the copious field it affords to an observer. Now affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy: for as vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavor to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under an appearance of their opposite virtues. And though these two causes are often confounded (for there is some difficulty in distinguishing them), yet, as they proceed from very different motives, so they are as clearly distinct in their operations: for indeed, the affectation which arises from vanity is nearer to truth than the other, as it hath not that violent repugnancy of nature to struggle with, which that of the hypocrite hath. It may be likewise noted, that affectation doth not imply an absolute negation of those qualities which are affected; and, therefore, though, when it proceeds from hypocrisy, it be nearly allied to deceit; yet when it comes from vanity only, it partakes of the nature of ostentation: for instance, the affectation of liberality in a vain man differs visibly from the same sort of affectation in the avaricious; for though the vain man is not what he would appear, or hath not the virtue he affects, to the degree he would be thought to have it; yet it sits less awkwardly on him than on the avaricious man, who is the very reverse of what he would seem to be.

From the discovery of this affectation arises the Ridiculous, which always strikes the reader with surprize and pleasure; and that in a higher and stronger degree when the affectation arises from hypocrisy than when from vanity; for to discover anyone to be the exact reverse of what he affects, is more surprizing, and consequently more ridiculous, than to find him a little deficient in the quality he desires the reputation of¹

Fielding continues with the assertion that poverty, ugliness, and infirmity are not proper subjects for ridicule unless they should exhibit pose or pretense. Evidently Fielding would approve of the satiric portrait of Beau Tibbs drawn so faultlessly by Goldsmith. Fielding insists

1 Fielding, Joseph Andrews, Preface, pp. XL, XLII.

that Joseph Andrews is to be kept distinct from romance on one hand and burlesque on the other. And he protests solemnly that he has no intention to "vilify or asperse anyone."¹ This latter point is apparently an important one with Fielding, for he makes a special effort to distinguish the satirist from the libeller:--

The former privately corrects the faults for the benefit of the person, like a parent; the latter publicly exposes the person himself, as an example to others, like an executioner.²

Jonathan Wild is a perfect example of sustained irony and illustrates quite clearly the distinction which Fielding draws between the comic and the burlesque.³ The hero, who is consistently described as a Great Man, finally succeeds in placing himself at the head of a gang of "bold and resolute fellows, fit for any enterprize, how dangerous or great, i.e. villainous soever. We have before remarked that the truest mark of greatness is insatiability!"⁴

After many misadventures Wild ends his glorious career in Newgate whence he is sentenced to be hanged, a fate which the author describes as the "highest consummation of human greatness." The pronouncement of his eulogy is the fitting climax:--

1 Fielding, Joseph Andrews, Preface, p. XLIII.

2 Ibid., Bk. III, Chapter 1, pp. 199-200.

3 Fielding, Joseph Andrews, Author's Preface, p. XXXVII, "burlesque is ever the exhibition of what is monstrous and unnatural." Wild is, of course, not only a hypocrite but a criminal monster, and as such a fit subject for burlesque rather than comic treatment. But Fielding goes on to say (p. XLII) that poverty, ugliness, and the like are not proper subjects for ridicule unless they exhibit pose or pretense in which case they may be laughed at. Cf. also Goldsmith's creation-Beau Tibbs.

4 Fielding, Jonathan Wild, pp. 62-63.

Indeed while Greatness consists in power, pride, insolence, and doing mischief to mankind;-- to speak out,-- while a Great Man and a Great Rogue are synonymous terms, so long shall Wild stand unrivaled on the pinnacle of Greatness.¹

There is scarcely a trace of sentimentality in Jonathan Wild except perhaps in the description of the Heartfree family who represent the bourgeois and domestic virtues and who finally manage to triumph over their tribulations. Tom Jones, on the other hand, generally conceded to be Fielding's masterpiece is somewhat of a mixture of comedy and sentimentality in spite of the author's obvious attempts to avoid the latter evil. In his introductory dedication to the Honourable George Lyttleton, Esquire, asking for patronage, Fielding declares his moral purpose to be to

recommend goodness and innocence and to inculcate that virtue and innocence can scarce ever be injured but by indiscretion; and that it is this alone which often betrays them into the snares that deceit and villainy spread for them . . . for this purpose I have employed all the wit and humour I am master of in an endeavor to laugh mankind out of their favourite follies and vices.²

This last phrase is of special significance in view of a later statement to the effect that:--

I am convinced I never make my reader laugh heartily but when I have laughed before him; unless it should happen at any time, that instead of laughing with me he should be inclined to laugh at me.³

Two of the minor characters are very good representations of the type of Jonsonian "humours." These are Square, the philosopher, and the

1 Fielding, Jonathan Wild, p. 236.

2 Fielding, The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling, p. XVII.

3 Ibid., Bk. IX, Chapter 1.

Reverend Mr. Thwackum who live as charitable dependents of Mr. Allworthy. They have very amusing arguments concerning human nature, which Square considers virtuous and perfect and Thwackum a "sink of iniquity."¹ The author, with his tongue in his cheek, interrupts to disclaim all intention of "casting any ridicule on the greatest perfections of human nature."²

On one occasion Square finds himself in a predicament similar to that suffered by Parson Adams (described above). Square is lecturing Tom on the benefits of pain and illness and is becoming very learned and eloquent on the subject (making use of second-hand, sentimental ideas from Lord Shaftesbury) when suddenly in the midst of his harangue he bites his tongue so hard he cannot refrain from muttering an oath or two and is obliged to "discontinue his discourse."³ Thwackum, who is enjoying his adversary's discomfiture, cannot forebear a malicious sneer.

The hero, who incidentally is never intended to achieve heroic stature, is a kind and amiable fellow with a sentimental regard for others. In most respects he is a very ordinary young man, and his sentimental impulses, such as selling his horse to give the proceeds to a deserving poor family,⁴ only serve to highlight his innate sincerity. In passing, it is worth notice that Squire Western objects to Tom on account of his birth and poverty;⁵ in fact he cannot imagine his daughter falling in love

1 Fielding, Tom Jones, Bk. III, Chap. 3.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., Bk. V, Chap. 2.

4 Ibid., Bk. III, Chap. 9.

5 Ibid., Bk. VI, Chap. 9.

with a poor man. This point is of interest in connection with Meredith's presentation of similar cases of social snobbery.

Tom is therefore not interpreted in the light of Fielding's comic theory. But his opponent, young Blifil, is a highly suitable subject for comic scorn. He is a hypocritical egoist who is motivated by ambition and avarice, but there is no touch of refinement or subtlety in his make-up. In fact according to Fielding's theory, Blifil's black-hearted villainy brings him more properly into the realm of burlesque than of comedy. As Saintsbury remarks, "He never comes alive . . . perhaps if he were to appear more actively, something of the dreadful greatness of Jonathan Wild would pass into him, and he would have dwarfed and eclipsed the healthier and lighter characters."¹

Sir Walter Scott in his Prefatory Memoir to The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle, says that Fielding is better in "grave irony" where Smollett "excels in broad and ludicrous humour."² Scott goes on to comment on the way in which Smollett seems to revel in

accumulating ridiculous circumstances one upon another, to the utter destruction of all power of gravity; and perhaps no books ever written have excited such peals of inextinguishable laughter . . . The descriptions which affect us thus powerfully border sometimes upon what is called farce or caricature.³

True enough, Smollett follows the tradition of the Jonsonian "humours" to such an accurate extent that he produces the inimitable

¹ Fielding, Tom Jones, Introduction, p. X.

² Smollett, Works, Preface, p. 25.

³ Ibid.

Commodore Trunnion who is introduced as a "very oddish kind of a gentleman,"¹ and after many ups and downs he is "at length teased and tortured into the noose of wedlock"² much against his better judgment. A somewhat similar presentation is that of the honest tar, Tom Bowling, maternal uncle to Roderick Random, who speaks of his kind generosity, "I always ascribed his benevolence to the dictates of a heart as yet undebauched by a commerce with mankind."³

This last phrase gives a clue to the tartness which is characteristic of Smollett's most typical comedy. He is inclined at times to favor a rather outspoken, almost savage satirical attack on whatever phases of life he considers deserving of such brutal treatment. He even descends to the realm of rough practical jokes and the lowest of low comedy. As Meredith says so justly of the celebrated supper in the manner of the ancients in Peregrine Pickle:- it "provides a cataract of laughter" but it is "not the laughter of the mind; it is not illuminating."⁴ However hilarious such episodes may be, they tend to become very "tedious pleasantries"⁵ by dint of over-exaggeration and much repetition.

Smollett does, however, excel in the mixture of satire and buffoonery with which he invests his picaresque plots, and although such a novel as The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom is no match for Fielding's

1 Smollett, Works, Preface, p. 32.

2 Ibid., p. 43.

3 Smollett, The Adventure of Roderick Random, p. 27.

4 Meredith, Essay on Comedy, p. 146.

5 Baker, The History of the English Novel, Vol. 4, p. 211.

Jonathan Wild, which it tries to resemble, it is, nevertheless, a lively and spirited, though less sustained, piece of irony. In Count Fathom Smollett assures his "refined readers" that any "courageous British satirist of this generation is accused of insolence, rancour, and scurrility," and that "we are rapidly approaching to the goal of perfection where satire dares not show her face . . . where humour turns changeling and slavers into an insipid grin; where wit is volatilized into a mere vapour,"¹ but by implication we are given to understand that Smollett himself intends to follow the dictates of his own free conscience and refuses to be bull-dozed into conformity. The cutting quality of his comedy derives a great deal of its effect from the influence of his professed masters, Cervantes and LeSage whose tendencies toward cynical caricature Smollett adopts as his own.

His last novel, The Expedition of Humphry Clinker, is far more mellow in tone than any of its predecessors and yet preserves the typical Smollett flavor in its fondness for the grotesque, humour type of character--Lieutenant Obadiah Lismahago being an outstanding example of the odd, eccentric creature Smollett loves to portray. Although the book is not a consistent parody by any means, there are several faint suggestions of burlesque directed against Pamela especially in the representation of the servant girl, Winifred Jenkins, who is removed by marriage to a "higher spear", and yet continues to "behave respectful and keep a proper distance."²

1 Smollett, The Adventures of Ferdinand, Count Fathom, p. 372.

2 Smollett, The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker, p. 435.

The comic method employed in *Tristram Shandy* is at variance with all the theories hitherto examined. As Sterne explains it, his book is:-

Wrote, an' please your Worships, against the spleen; in order, by a more frequent and a more conclusive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles of laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from the gall-bladder, liver, and sweetbread of his Majesty's subjects, with all the inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duordenums.¹

A little later in the same novel, Sterne expresses his purpose in more intelligible fashion when he indulges in the comparatively conservative convention of an Invocation to the "Gentle Spirit of sweetest humour, who erst didst sit upon the easy pen of my beloved Cervantes . . turn in hither, I beseech thee."²

Aside from the deliberate oddities and eccentricities of style, such as those illustrated above in the first quotation, Sterne's comedy has an inclination toward sympathetic sentimentality. According to Meredith's distinction it should be classified as Humour rather than intellectual comedy. Sterne's most famous and most lovable creation is "my uncle Toby" whose gentle humor is that of a kindly soul who is in a direct line of descent from the equally beloved Parson Adams. Sterne's comedy, pure as it is, is tinged with more than a slight suspicion of sentimentality which suffuses it with a peculiarly highly-colored flavor. The episode of Uncle Toby and the fly³ is too well known to bear further repetition, but not so widely known, though of special significance, is

1 Sterne, Works, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, Bk. IV, Chapter XXII, p. 190.

2 Ibid., Bk. IX, Chapter XXIV, p. 381.

3 Sterne, Works, Tristram Shandy, Bk. II, Chapter XII, pp. 80-81.

the following apostrophe which indicates clearly the particular quality referred to above:--

Peace and comfort rest for evermore upon thy head:- thou enviedst no man's comforts, insultedst no man's opinions,-- blackenedst no man's character,-- devouredst no man's head! Gently, with faithful Trim behind thee, didst thou ramble round the little circle of thy pleasures, jostling no creature in thy way: for each one's sorrows thou hadst a tear,-- for each man's need thou hadst a shilling.¹

Goldsmith, who, as Meredith says, has "grave command of the comic in narrative,"² presents in *The Vicar of Wakefield* an appealing study in comic character in the person of the good Dr. Primrose, who, like his predecessors--Parson Adams and Uncle Toby--is compounded of a lovable mixture of faults³ and virtues. In spite of his naive vanity and tactlessness, he has an essential sweetness of disposition that cannot help giving him an irresistible and endearing quality--though we may be tempted to smile at his harmless and innocent foibles.

Dr. Primrose's wife comes in for her share of comic treatment on the score of her ambitious desire for her daughters to make marriages that will enable them to rise in the social scale. Her husband, who is conveniently blind to his own faults, is able to point out to her the ridiculousness of her follies, and reads her a severe lecture on the "contemptible character of future-hunting women."⁴ Mrs. Primrose, like

1 Sterne, Works, Tristram Shandy, Bk. III, Chapter XXXIV, p. 145.

2 Meredith, Essay on Comedy, p. 94.

3 Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield, p. 75. Dr. Primrose considers himself thoroughly competent in business matters, but proves as gullible as Moses with his gross of green spectacles when he is swindled out of his remaining horse by a crafty appeal to his vanity.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice, belongs to that class of mortals whose highest ambition is to aspire to greater social achievements for their family and whose comic tendency is to "look down on the scrubs about us."¹ Although neither Mrs. Primrose nor Mrs. Bennett possesses the cleverness of the Countess de Saldar in Evan Harrington, they are all motivated by the same comic mainspring--social snobbery. Unfortunately Goldsmith's comedy breaks down into moralizing halfway through the novel, and thereafter creaks along in very disappointing fashion.

Fanny Burney carries on the Jonsonian "humour" tradition with her portrayal not of full-length characters but figures marked by some one prominent feature. Her people are, as Hazlitt describes them, "ingenious caricatures, and her forte is depicting absurdities and affectations of external behavior or the manners of people in company."² In Evelina the comedy centers chiefly on the exposure of vulgarity in the person of the low-comedy figure of Madame Duval who is the butt of well-deserved ridicule. She is much the same kind of creature as Meredith's Mrs. Chump in Sandra Belloni, except, however, that she lacks the latter's likable, warm-hearted qualities.

Cecilia, which is a much more ambitious study, is similar to Evelina in that it is the story of a young lady's entry into polite society. In comic delineation of character it surpasses Evelina in that it has a broader basis for its satirical attack on eighteenth century

1 Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield, p. 52.

2 Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Comic Writers, p. 123.

follies. The emphasis is concentrated on the varying phases of social snobbery¹ and the whole thing is handled in an amusing, light vein. It is easy to see that Jane Austen derives a great deal more from Fanny Burney than the mere phrase which she uses as a title for her most famous novel.

The only reason for including Beckford's Vathek in this survey is that it offers some striking similarities with Meredith's The Shaving of Shagpat. Beckford's mockery of Oriental romance is quite in the spirit of Meredith's robust, farcical manner. And the episodes he invents are thoroughly fantastic with a touch of sardonic irony and cynical wit not unlike that of Meredith. Beckford, however, carries the burlesque further even than Meredith's hearty attempts, and the whole effect of Vathek falls short of satirical perfection because of its lack of complete sincerity and its over-exaggeration.

Whatever may be our opinion of Jane Austen, it is impossible not to agree with Meredith that she is one of our most "delightful comic writers" and that her characters might "walk straight into a comedy were the plot arranged for them."² This is particularly true of her two outstanding masterpieces--Pride and Prejudice and Emma, both of which are rich in comic and dramatic values. The theme of social snobbery comes in for its share of special comic attack in the person of Mrs. Bennet

1 Burney, Cecilia or The Memoirs of An Heiress, pp. 44-45. Satirical attack is directed against the "Supercilious" and the "Voluble"-- "this they have in common, that at home they think of nothing but dress, abroad, of nothing but admiration, and that everywhere they hold in supreme contempt all but themselves."

2 Meredith, Essay on Comedy, p. 132.

in Pride and Prejudice, and in Emma it is the heroine herself who is exposed to ruthless ridicule for her follies and pretenses. Perhaps the sharpest shafts of comedy are reserved for a complete prig like Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice, and we note the fact that Jane Austen, like Meredith and Peacock, feels that a certain type of clergyman is a perfectly legitimate target for ridicule.

Jane Austen's own theory of comedy is best summed up in the words of Elizabeth Bennet:--

I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.¹

In one of her wise and witty letters to her sister, Cassandra, Jane Austen makes an off-hand critical reference to her comic method which shows it to be akin to that of Meredith in cleverness and brilliance. Apropos of Pride and Prejudice, she remarks:--

The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté, or anything that would form a contrast, and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style. I doubt your quite agreeing with me here. I know your starched notions.²

Again like Meredith, Jane Austen exhibits a wide range and development of comedy from her earliest attempt at farcical burlesque in

1 Austen, Pride and Prejudice, Chapter 11, p. 62. Cf. Mr. Bennet's view of the world which may be safely attributed to Jane Austen herself:-- "For what do we live but to make sport for our neighbors and to laugh at them in our turn." Chapter 57, p. 401.

2 Austen, Letters, to Cassandra Austen, February 4, 1813, Vol. II, pp. 299-300.

Northanger Abbey,¹ which is a perfect take-off of the popular contemporary Gothic romances, to her finished maturity of high comedy style in Pride and Prejudice and Emma which offer brilliant and subtle studies in sophisticated comic technique.

Curiously enough, Meredith singles out for special praise in his Essay the work of one of the minor figures in English fiction, John Galt, whose "neglected novels," he says, "have some characters and strokes of shrewd comedy."² Upon examination, we find one of Galt's works to be a brief tale in satiric vein about the wise man who has never been out of Bagdad, but who finally makes a journey to the "end of the world"³ and with amazement beholds remarkable sights, such as ducks with expressions entirely different from those in Bagdad. On his return, the traveler is feted, goes about delivering lectures, finally dies from over-eating at a banquet, and has a memorial raised to his everlasting honor. Although the tale is extremely condensed, it does, nevertheless, have notable points of resemblance both in manner and matter to Meredith's more extended but similar parody of the popular Oriental romance. The satire has a cutting edge of truth that brings it close to Meredith's more ambitious allegory.

Somewhat better known is Galt's The Annals of the Parish, a quiet, domestic chronicle of simple, daily events in a Scottish village, reminding us inevitably of The Vicar of Wakefield or Cranford or A Window in

1 Cf. Meredith's similar early attempt at farcical burlesque in The Shaving of Shagpat.

2 Meredith, Essay on Comedy, p. 132.

3 Galt, Haddad-Ben-Ahab The Traveller, p. 64.

Thrums. The Reverend Micah Balwhidder, the diarist, although he has three wives, is in other respects not unlike the good Dr. Primrose. A full measure of comic wrath is poured out upon the Lady Macadam, a "canary-headed woman, given to flights and tantrums."¹ And Miss Sabrina Hooky, the school mistress, comes in for her share of comic attention because of her harmless vanities--Miss Sabrina is described as "always an oddity and aping grandeur."² On the whole, however, the comedy is not of a very startling variety although it is pleasant enough with a warmth of real unsentimental sympathy behind it. Henry Mackenzie, author of The Man of Feeling, points out the obvious fact that the "humorous passages make no attempt at brilliancy of wit or strength of caricature."³

One other work by Galt deserves special mention--The Ayrshire Legatees--because of its indebtedness to Smollett's Humphry Clinker. The arrangement of the material and even the brand of humor follows close upon the model provided by Smollett. Dr. Pringle, a benevolent and beloved, though somewhat eccentric pastor from the Scottish highlands takes his wife, his daughter, Rachel, and his son, Andrew to London on business concerning a legacy left them by a cousin who has recently died in India. The story is told in the form of letters by different members of the family describing the arduous and dangerous journey. After many

1 Galt, Annals of the Parish, p. 39.

2 Ibid., p. 135. Cf. p. 40 where she is further described as "more uppish in her carriage than befitted the decorum of her vocation."

3 Ibid., p. 293. Quoted from a critical article originally published in Blackwoods Magazine, May, 1821.

amusing adventures¹ there is the usual conventional happy ending. The humor of the whole thing is much gentler than even the mellow comedy of Humphry Clinker, and surely these last two works of Galt have nothing in common with the sharp acerbity of most of Meredith's mature fiction.

The most important single influence upon Meredith is that of his famous father-in-law, Thomas Love Peacock, whose peculiar comic genius is reflected with unconscious accuracy in many of Meredith's novels. After the fiasco of Meredith's first marriage, he would never refer in any way to Peacock and destroyed all available copies of his early poems which had been originally published in 1851 with a dedication to T. L. P. There is, however, on record one remark in which Meredith declares that it was of great advantage to him in youth to have been associated with Peacock and that Peacock's writing had been a great model for him.² It is, therefore, of special significance to note the theories and uses of comedy to be found in Peacock's fiction.

In Maid Marian, Peacock speaking in the person of Friar Tuck states his philosophy of comedy as follows:--

You are welcome to laugh if it so please you. None shall laugh in my company, though it be at my expense, but I will have my share of the merriment. The world is a stage and life is a farce, and he that laughs most has most profit of the performance. The worst thing is good enough to be laughed at, though it be good for nothing else; and the best thing, though it be good for something else, is good for nothing better.³

1 Galt, The Ayrshire Legatees, p. 176. One incident concerning stage-coach etiquette leads the Doctor to exclaim:- "Really I had no notion the English were so civilised and so well-bred."

2 Butcher, Memories of George Meredith, p. 92.

3 Peacock, Works, Halliford Edition, Vol. III, Maid Marian, Chap. XVI, p. 159.

In Headlong Hall Peacock uses his favorite device of gathering congenial guests together in a country house for flow of soul and feast of reason. Harry Headlong, a typical Welsh squire in his fondness for shooting, fishing, etc., nevertheless "actually suffers certain phenomena, called books, to find their way into his house."¹ He decides on a Christmas house party and invites a group of Jonsonian "humour" eccentrics to help him celebrate the holidays--among them are Mr. Foster, the "perfectibilian," Mr. Escot, the "deteriorationist," Mr. Jenkinson, the "statu-quo-ite," and the Reverend Dr. Gaster, "neither a philosopher nor a man of taste, but who has won the Squire's fancy by a learned dissertation on the art of stuffing a turkey."² Endless arguments and discussions ensue on Peacock's favorite topic of what he calls, the "march of mind."

Nightmare Abbey provides another opportunity for a gathering of a miscellaneous assortment of eccentricities in a country house in Lincolnshire. There are good satiric portraits of actual contemporary figures like Coleridge (Mr. Flosky), Shelley (Scythrop, the hero), Byron (Mr. Cypress), and Southey (Mr. Sackbut). The atmosphere of the piece is bathed in comic melancholia, and young Scythrop, who has a hard time settling his affections on one girl, finally qualifies "to take a very advanced degree in misanthropy," but instead of committing suicide as he romantically threatened to do, resigns himself to his fate instead and

1 Peacock, Headlong Hall, p. 51.

2 Ibid., p. 53.

gives orders to Raven, his servant, to "Bring some Madeira."¹

Exuberant comedy characterizes The Misfortunes of Elphin which contains rollicking farce and a satirical romance at one and the same time. Crotchet Castle introduces a suggestion of social satire directed against the forces of snobbery and conceit. The owner of the Castle is of mixed Scottish and Jewish blood, and being ashamed of his dubious background, has a "hankering after high blood,"² and ambitiously fills his castle with a company of cranks and quacks to whom he dispenses lavish hospitality in the mistaken notion that he is furthering his social aspirations. Like Meredith, Peacock makes use of a clever, witty woman³ who is capable of penetrating and exposing all hollow sham and pretense behind her mask of worldliness. There is a fantastic air of unreality about all the characters who are treated in light ironical vein much like that used in Point Counter Point. Again the clergy is considered a legitimate target for comic scorn, and Peacock takes perverse delight in upsetting the dignity of the pompous Dr. Folliott⁴ who finds himself hopelessly entangled in an argument concerning political economy.

Later in life Peacock published a novel, Gryll Grange, which shows him in an unfamiliar mellow mood. As though to make amends to the maligned race of clergymen, Peacock presents the Reverend Dr. Opimian who

1 Peacock, Nighmare Abbey, p. 298.

2 Peacock, Crotchet Castle, p. 147.

3 Ibid., Lady Clarinda, who is the mistress of a malicious tongue.

4 Baker, History of the English Novel, Vol. 7, p. 139. Dr. Folliott is "almost, but fortunately not quite, Peacock's own facsimile." Priestly also in his biography of Peacock, p. 159, comments on the mistake many critics have made of identifying Dr. Folliott with Peacock.

is "not a man made to pattern; he is simple-minded, learned, tolerant, and the quintessence of bonhomie."¹ And so Dr. Opimian at once joins the ranks of Parson Adams, Uncle Toby, and Dr. Primrose. A bit pedantic, he is human, kindly, unworldly. He has a characteristic distrust of science that is almost Carlylean in its intensity. He is sure that science has inflicted numerous evils on man and is not sure but that it is the ultimate destiny of science to exterminate the human race. After some most diverting scenes of high comedy, interspersed with low comedy containing rustic humor, "our comedy"² ends with the hero renouncing his folly³ and settling down into a lifetime of pleasant domestic peace. And the benevolent Dr. Opimian wishes everyone health and happiness.

With the advent of Dickens, we find comedy reverting to the Jonsonian type of "humour" characters best expressed in the occasional grotesque caricatures which in spite of perverse exaggeration still carry within themselves an energetic sense of vitality and reality. Such are Mrs. Gamp⁴ in Martin Chuzzlewit, Alfred Jingle in Pickwick Papers, and Sam Weller and his inimitable parent, old Mr. Weller, par excellence, in the same novel. Best of all is the incomparable Mr. Micawber in David Copperfield and his no less original spouse, Mrs. Micawber, who are not only exquisitely comical in themselves, but like Bardolph, in Henry IV, Part 1,

1 Peacock, Gryll Grange, p. 89.

2 Ibid., p. 291.

3 Ibid., p. 255. Lord Curryfin is finally convinced of the folly of being a member of the Pantopragmatic Society!

4 Knight, The Novel in English, p. 174. Knight speaks of Dickens' humor as "red-cheeked, vulgar, slangy..but always clear-eyed, wholehearted, healthy."

the cause of humor in others. Mr. Micawber is drawn from Dickens' own father, just as Richmond Roy in The Adventures of Harry Richmond is inspired by Meredith's father, and the "Great Mel" in Evan Harrington by Meredith's grandfather. Mr. Micawber, Richmond Roy, and the Great Mel are alike in that they all are glorious imposters, lovable rogues and rascals drawn on a large and generous scale, almost in heroic proportions.

There are a number of interesting and striking similarities between various comic characters of Dickens and Meredith. Chief among these are the Cogglesby brothers in Evan Harrington who correspond almost too closely to the Cheeryble brothers in Nicholas Nickleby, and Jack Raikes, also in Evan Harrington, who is very much like an echo of Alfred Jingle in Pickwick Papers. Discerning critics have deplored the alien influence of Dickens upon the youthful Meredith, and have felt, justly, that Meredith's genius for comedy properly takes a quite different direction¹ from that of Dickens whose exuberant comedy generally borders on the purely farcical.²

Thackeray's theory of comedy is best expressed in his work on The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century. He writes as follows:-

Humour appeals to a great number of our other faculties, besides our mere sense of ridicule. The humorous writer

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- 1 Dickens' influence is felt to be alien because Meredith's professed purpose in comedy is to "awaken thoughtful laughter of the mind." This quiet, intellectual aim is far removed from the uproarious effects of Dickens' comedy.
 - 2 Priestley, The English Comic Characters, p. 207. Priestley is inclined to give Dickens credit for creating "pure comedy characters rich in droll philosophy," notably the Wellers in Pickwick Papers, which he calls a "comic epic of the English countryside."

professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness--your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture--your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his means and ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak. Accordingly, as he finds, and speaks, and feels the truth best, we regard him, esteem him--sometimes love him.¹

It is worth noticing that Thackeray's notion of comedy includes a strong tinge of sentimentality, something entirely foreign to the Meredithian formula. And yet, strangely enough, Thackeray's earliest creative endeavors are all directed toward burlesque and social satire, much in the same vein as Meredith's earliest efforts. Among these we note particularly Rebecca and Rowena, an extended and minute parody of Scott, which takes infinite delight in poking fun at Scott's glorification of the Middle Ages.

Another of Thackeray's early works is Cox's Diary² which recounts the adventures of Barber Cox and The Cutting of His Comb, a broadly farcical tale of the barber and his family who come in for a fortune and make a great splash with it only to be laughed at by the people whom they try to outdo. After a series of comic misadventures the Coxes are glad enough to return to the humble simplicity of their original way of life.

The Yellowplush Papers, which satirize novels that glorify vice and crime, are concerned largely with the career of the enriched footman

1 Thackeray, The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century, p. 4.

2 Thackeray, Miscellanies, Vol. 1, p. 514. Scorn of social pretense is evident in the description of the barber's wife who is "bent on marrying her daughter to a Lord." Cox himself finally perceives the folly and error of their ways (p. 517)-- "See, my love, we have been gentlefolks for exactly a year, and a pretty life we have had of it . . . We gave grand dinners and everybody laughed at us."

who has made a fortune by gambling with railroad stock. The series of loosely connected episodes are notable chiefly as Thackeray's attempt to imitate Jonathan Wild, rather unsuccessful and dull here, but carried to perfection later in Barry Lyndon.

The History of Samuel Titmarsh and The Great Hoggarty Diamond is a fairly humorous story of the Napoleonic promoter, Mr. Brough, and the bubble companies which crash and involve the unwary Titmarsh in imprisonment for other people's debts. The social satire which illuminates the efforts of Samuel Titmarsh to ape the nobility is soon lost in a lapse into tearful sentimentality over his well-deserved fate. His rescue and restoration to comparative comfort and ease are inconsistent with the satirical implications which lend a wholesome touch of tart irony to the opening sections of the narrative.

The novelette, Catherine, a story of seventeenth century crime, drawn from the chronicles of Newgate Prison, is much better done from the point of view of a carefully documented piece of rogue literature. It is delightfully straight forward and outspoken, as the following excerpt will attest:--

We say, let your rogue in novels act like rogues, and your honest men like honest men; don't let us have any juggling and thimblerrigging with virtue and vice, so that, at the end of three volumes, the bewildered reader shall not know which is which; don't let us find ourselves kindling at the generous qualities of thieves, and sympathizing with the rascalities of noble hearts. For our part, we know what the public likes, and have chosen rogues for our characters, and have taken a story from the 'Newgate Calendar,' which we hope to follow out to edification.¹

1 Thackeray, Catherine, A Story, pp. 77-78.

And again:--

. . . though we are only in the third chapter of this history, we feel almost sick of the characters that appear in it, and the adventures which they are called upon to go through. But how can we help ourselves? The public will hear of nothing but rogues; and the only way in which poor authors, who must live, can act honestly by the public and themselves, is to paint such thieves as they are: not dandy, poetical, rose-water thieves; but real downright scoundrels, leading scoundrelly lives, drunken, profligate, dissolute, low; as scoundrels will be. They don't quote Plato, like Eugene Aram; or live like gentlemen, and sing the pleasantest ballads in the world, like jolly Dick Turpin; or prate eternally about To Kanav, like that precious canting Maltravers, whom we all of us have read about and pitied; or die whitewashed saints like poor 'Biss Dadsy' in Oliver Twist: No, my dear Madam, you and your daughters have no right to admire and sympathize with any such persons, fictitious or real; you ought to be made cordially to detest scorn, loathe, abhor, and abominate all people of this kidney. Men of genius, like those whose works we have above alluded to, have no business to make these characters interesting or agreeable keep your sympathy for those who deserve it; don't carry it, for preference, to the Old Bailey, and grow maudlin over the company assembled there.¹

Of all Thackeray's apprentice fiction, by far the best for satiric effect, is The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq. which represents his first full-length attempt at novel writing. In good, sound, picaresque style, Barry Lyndon describes his career as a soldier of fortune, gamester, and adventurer who fights, gambles, and cheats his way all over Europe. Thackeray's method of attack follows closely the manner of Jonathan Wild but unfortunately even here his initial irony breaks down into sentimental moralizing. Satire and irony are weapons that Thackeray never succeeds in bringing under perfect control.

¹ Thackeray, Catherine, A Story, p. 96.

Although not cast in narrative vein, The Book of Snobs By One of Themselves, is notable as representing Thackeray's early attempts to formulate a comic theory which he used later with immense effectiveness in his great and mature fiction. His point of view, for instance, toward "Great City Snobs" who display a "mania for aristocratic marriages,"¹ is significant not only in the development of his own genius, but in comparison with a similar tendency in the growth and development of the genius of Meredith. Both Thackeray and Meredith show an increasing preoccupation with the role played by snobbery in the social comedy. In The Book of Snobs Thackeray suggest several types of snobbery that are to be found in the pages of Meredith. In the chapter on "Clerical Snobs" Thackeray says, "you would fancy that a parson's life was passed in gorging himself with plum-pudding and port-wine,"² but at the same time, unlike Meredith, he lets the clergy off very lightly and professes no desire to cast ridicule upon them. And again in the chapter on "Continental Snobbery," Thackeray remarks:-

We are accustomed to laugh at the French for their braggadocio propensities and intolerable vanity about la France, la gloire, l'Empereur, and the like; and yet I think in my heart that the British Snob, for conceit and self-sufficiency and braggartism, in his way, is without a parallel.³

And finally Thackeray concludes that "to laugh at Snobs is Mr. Punch's business. May he laugh honestly, hit no foul blow, and tell the

1 Thackeray, The Book of Snobs, p. 214.

2 Ibid., p. 228.

3 Ibid., 281.

truth when at his very broadest grin--never forgetting that if Fun is good, Truth is still better."¹

And so we come to the end of our preliminary survey of the comic tradition in English fiction, and are now ready to turn to a detailed examination of Meredith's place therein.

¹ Thackeray, The Book of Snobs, p. 405.

THEORIES OF COMEDY AND THE USES OF THE COMIC SPIRIT

Meredith's famous Essay on Comedy and The Uses of the Comic Spirit was delivered as a lecture on February 1, 1877 at the London Institution for the Advancement of Literature and the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.¹ The following April it was published in The New Quarterly Magazine.² A letter to Miss Alice Brandreth dated November 3, 1876 indicates that Meredith was already formulating his theories.³ He writes, "I am very busy and shall get no work done for next year if I cease to lash myself; and I am disturbed about my lecture and doubt if it will please."⁴

We are glad to have the reassurance voiced in a letter to John Morley, February 3, 1877:--

One line. All went well. Morison in one of his enthusiasms, which make one remember that one has word praise. Audience very attentive and indulgent. Time 1 h. 25 m., and no one left the hall, so that I may imagine there was interest in the lecture. Pace moderate; but Morison thinks I was intelligible chiefly by the distinctness of articulation.⁵

An analysis of the points developed carefully in the Essay reveals the fact that Meredith gives us a philosophical exposition of his mature theories of comedy worked out over a long period of years. According to Meredith's theories the first and primary requirement of comedy is a

1 Meredith, Essay on Comedy and Uses of Comic Spirit, Intro. by L. Cooper, p. 26.

2 Ibid., p. 171.

3 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. I., p. 269.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., pp. 270-71.

selective intellectual milieu, where men and women both must be well-educated, well-mannered, and finely sensitive in order to appreciate the part played by comedy in the life around them.¹ Intellectual activity is essential in a "society of cultivated men and women, wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick."² Comedy can **never** flourish in a "semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities and feverish emotional periods, for it is repelled by a state of marked social inequality of the sexes."³

This last point leads to a discussion of a favorite thesis of Meredith, namely, that of the necessity for a sound and healthy basis of both social and intellectual equality between the sexes. Meredith was always an ardent advocate of coeducation⁴ and an eager and zealous champion of women's rights.⁵ Comedy, he thinks, is particularly dependent on a civilized society where full and free equality is granted unquestioningly.⁶ Women, he insists, should be allowed equal opportunity with men for the display of wit and common sense.⁷ Since men and women possess common aims and ideals in life, they should work and play together on a common social and intellectual level.⁸

1 Meredith, Essay on Comedy and Uses of Comic Spirit, p. 75.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 His opinions on this subject are expressed with greatest clarity in Lord Ormont and His Aminta.

5 Meredith, always ready to take up the cudgels on behalf of women, wields them with especial vigor in Diana of the Crossways.

6 Meredith, Op. Cit., p. 118.

7 Ibid.

8 Meredith, Essay on Comedy and Uses of Comic Spirit, p. 118.

Where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty--in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilization--there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions.¹

The whole concept of comedy rouses a certain amount of opposition, particularly among the Puritans, who laugh too little, and the Bacchanalians, who laugh too much.² The Puritanical foes of comedy are the "agelasts":--

that is to say, non-laughers--men who are in that respect as dead bodies, which, if you prick them, do not bleed. The old gray boulder-stone, that has finished its peregrination from the rock to the valley, is as easily to be set rolling up again as these men laughing.³

Meredith goes on to say that the "non-laughter" is only one step from the "laughter-hater," who "soon learns to dignify his dislike as an objection in morality."⁴ Real comedy never adopts a heavy, moralizing attitude toward life, and consequently the Puritan or "agelast" is definitely opposed to it.

The "idle, empty laughter"⁵ of the Bacchanalians is just as much a foe of comedy as the sober solemnity of the Puritans. This second type of foe may be classified under the heading of "hypergelasts":--

1 Meredith, Essay on Comedy and Uses of Comic Spirit, p. 118, 119.

2 Ibid., p. 77.

3 Ibid., pp. 76-77.

4 Ibid., p. 77.

5 Ibid., p. 77

these are the excessive laughers, ever-laughing, who are as clappers of a bell, that may be rung by a breeze, a grimace; who are so loosely put together that a wink will shake them . . . to laugh at everything is to have no appreciation of the comic of comedy.¹

As a corrective device, one of the greatest uses of comedy is to "turn a calm and curious eye"² on egoism, unreason, excessive sentimentality, pretense, hypocrisy, prejudice, and vanity. Comedy is a "fountain of sound sense: not the less perfectly sound on account of the sparkle."³ Its fundamental purpose is the exposure to public scorn and ridicule of follies, foibles, errors, and weaknesses of all sorts. Moreover, comedy particularly enjoys "probing cultivated men and women for what they are"⁴ in order to prove that it is not wise to expect too much of them, "though you may still hope for good."⁵

In order to bring about the best results Comedy employs cleverly effective methods. It never "grows angry or impatient with follies."⁶ A light touch is better than a solemn attack. Since Comedy functions as a "kindly, governing agent,"⁷ it never "dishonours human nature, nor is it hostile to sentiment, nor spiteful, nor does it make unfair use of laughter."⁸ Psychological and analytical in tendency, it is always

1 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, p. 77.

2 Ibid., p. 91.

3 Ibid., p. 92.

4 Ibid., p. 91.

5 Ibid., p. 106.

6 Ibid., p. 139.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

"impersonal and polite,"¹ and is never hilarious nor derisive. It is "concerned with present action not with beginning or endings or surroundings."²

In a particularly enlightening passage, Meredith draws a fine distinction between Comedy on the one hand and Satire, Irony, and Humor on the other. Satire and Irony are alike in that both possess a touch of malice, while Humor is at the opposite end of the scale with its over-sympathetic, sentimental attitude.³ It is easy to see that Meredith does not approve of any of these forms of correction. Comedy, however, is the ideal instrument of correction because unlike Satire it does not "drive sharply into the quivering sensibilities" and unlike Humor it does not "comfort them and tuck them up."⁴ Incidentally, it is of interest to note in passing that Meredith derides the "habit of punning and of using humoristic phrase, the trick of employing Johnsonian polysyllables to treat of the infinitely little."⁵ He thinks that the "sense of the comic is much blunted"⁶ by such deplorable devices. And yet he does not seem to realize that he was often guilty himself in his own style of ignoring this very excellent and sensible rule. Like the good Dr. Johnson who

1 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and Uses of the Comic Spirit, p. 140.

2 Ibid., p. 139.

3 Ibid., p. 133.

4 Ibid., p. 134.

5 Ibid., p. 122.

6 Ibid., p. 122.

accused Shakespeare of being over-fond of a quibble,¹ Meredith evidently is unaware of his own shortcomings.²

Finally Meredith states the individual test for the perception of the comic is the ability to "detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in their eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes."³ The importance of healthy laughter and a sound sense of humor as an incentive to sanity can hardly be over-emphasized. It is a cardinal tenet in Meredith's carefully built up theory of comedy. Concurrent with the individual test is a similar one for the civilization of a whole country, wherein Meredith declares his belief that an excellent test for such a civilization is the "flourishing of the comic idea and comedy."⁴ He goes on to say that the "test of true comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter."⁵

The Comic Spirit, as personified by Meredith, is an integral part of his theory. His definition of it is so masterly as to be worth quoting in part:--

If you believe that our civilization is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it),

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- 1 Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare in The Great Critics, ed. by Smith and Parks, p. 454. Johnson says of Shakespeare, "a quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it." Johnson's own addiction to such mannerisms is notorious.
 - 2 Usually Meredith is only too ready to admit any changes of stylistic eccentricities and in fact parades them proudly, but here his condemnation of such tricks is severe.
 - 3 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and Uses of the Comic Spirit, p. 132.
 - 4 Ibid., p. 141. Cf. pp. 151-52 for an interesting comparison of France and Germany in this respect.
 - 5 Ibid.

you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half-tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely-tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk; the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit."¹

1 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and Uses of The Comic Spirit, pp. 141-42.

THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT

Meredith's first novel, The Shaving of Shagpat, although written twenty-two years before the publication of the Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, if it is subjected to close critical analysis, will reward the critic with some interesting revelations concerning the consistency of the author's theories of comedy. This is not to say that Meredith had already actually formulated his theories, nor to maintain that The Shaving of Shagpat is anything more pretentious than a first novel, brilliant though it is.

It must be admitted at the outset that there is no attempt at realistic portrayal of character or character development, nor is there the slightest degree of realism in the selection of social background for the tale. Therefore there would be no reason to try to interpret the material in the novel from the point of view of theories yet unvoiced. The novel is unreal, fantastic, a sort of adaptation of the Arabian Nights entertainment.

Nevertheless there are numerous faint foreshadowings of the later comic method that are well worth study. The hero of the novel, Shibli Bagarag, is a young barber, swollen up with pride of his "profession," and full of vain pretension to show the world how great he really is. He is determined to carve a career for himself and sets forth in lordly style to find a job worthy of him. It will be noted at this point that the character, though sketched lightly, is a typical target for the shafts of the Comic Spirit. He is typical in the sense that his fundamental weakness of character, egoistic vanity, is one which Meredith attacked

over and over again. His character is indicated along fantastic rather than realistic lines, and there is no attempt, as has been pointed out above, at selecting a characteristic social background for the hero. He is a social climber, but not in the same sense as Evan Harrington is, or Mart Tinman in The House on the Beach.

Shibli Bagarag's pride, vanity, pompousness, and pretense will inevitably lead him to some sort of humiliation. And so it is. In his desperate desire to exercise his craft and carve a great career for himself, Shibli is easily duped by two people--the Vizier, Teshnavat, and his daughter, Noorna bin Noorka, who are jealous of Shagpat because he is "admired and marveled at by the people" as he lolls in "solemn priestliness in his shop-front."¹

They have no trouble in enlisting the sympathies of Shibli in their scheme to shave the hairy Shagpat and thus deprive him of the glory for which they envy him. Noorna, in particular, realizes that the poor young hero in his innocent readiness for adventure will be an easy victim of vanity, for when she informs him that the stars have foretold his coming to save them from "disgrace and scorn," he is like a "peacock in pride."² Shibli's eagerness results in the famous thwackings of the first few chapters which, though highly ludicrous, have no special comic significance in the usual Meredithian sense of the word. They have

1 Meredith, The Shaving of Shagpat, p. 16.

2 Ibid., p. 91. "His mind strutted through the future of his days and down the ladder of all time, exacting homage from men, his brethren; he was as feathered seed before the breath of vanity.

no deterrent effect on Shibli but only serve to strengthen his resolution to get on with his adventure.

As the story gets under way, Shibli's gullibility increases to such a point that Noorna, who has become his fiancée and guiding spirit, reproaches him for "defeating his great aim by silly conceit."¹ He is diverted by childish follies but still retains enough shreds of common sense to know that he must follow his destiny without being sidetracked along the way. Another interesting new factor is the emergence of Noorna as the instrument of the Comic Spirit--by pointing out to Shibli his vanities and follies and warning him of their probable fatal consequences. This is the first evidence we find in Meredith of his preoccupation with the part played by woman in exposing the comic side of man.

Two important episodes in the development of the plot reveal distinctly comic possibilities. The first one is concerned with Shibli's journey to the kingdom of Oolb where he temporarily forgets Noorna and falls under the spell of the Princess Goorelka. He is completely amazed when Noorna appears and with her magic spells dissipates the mists of illusion that have beclouded him.² Noorna confides to him that one of her greatest successes in sorcery was freeing the enchanted birds, among them her father, who had suffered metamorphosis and imprisonment in the wicked kingdom of Oolb.³

1 Meredith, The Shaving of Shagpat, p. 111.

2 Ibid., p. 129.

3 Ibid., p. 136.

If the "privilege of laughter"¹ could be exercised to the extent that the birds would continue laughing uninterruptedly for one hour, then they would be restored to human shape. Noorna tells Shibli that after being foiled in one attempt, she devised the plan of relating a story which "rocked the birds on their perches with chestquakes of irresistible laughter."² At the end of an hour the laughter ceased and the birds were transformed into men, but their "visages became long and solemn" as if they had seen a "dark experience."³

The significance of this episode is that it illustrates for the first time in Meredith his favorite theory of comedy, that of the sane, healthy, refreshing power of laughter to free mankind of folly. If men can laugh at themselves, they are safe from the shafts of the Comic Spirit. Although Meredith specifically denied allegorical intentions in The Shaving of Shagpat, it is decidedly difficult to escape all allegorical implications in his story of the releasing of the enchanted birds by laughter. Meredith is quoted as saying of himself:--

"The subtle Arab who conceived Shagpat meant either very much more or he meant less and my belief is that designing in his wisdom simply to amuse, he attempted to give a larger embrace to time than is possible to the profound dispenser of allegories which to be of any value must be perfectly clear and when perfectly clear, are as little attractive as Mrs. Malaprop's reptile."⁴

1 Meredith, The Shaving of Shagpat, p. 139.

2 Ibid., p. 143. ff.

3 Ibid., p. 143.

4 Jerrold, George Meredith, An Essay Toward Appreciation, p. 88. Quoted from the Prefatory Note to the Second Edition of Shagpat issued in 1865. Compare Meredith's statement quoted in Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 82--"Shagpat did wear a kind of allegory in the form of a loose dressing gown," but Meredith protests that he "wished to forget all about its possible allegorical meaning."

We may pass quickly over the following incident in which Shibli again falls under a magic spell, this time wielded by the powerful Rabesqurat, Queen of Illusions. The whole affair is strikingly similar to the preceding one in Oolb, and illustrates again quite pointedly Shibli's fatal tendency to vanity. He actually does believe a "crown is hanging for me among the stars . . . and I search a point of earth to intercept its fall."¹ But all this is merely a minor test of character.

The second and most important episode with real comic possibilities already alluded to occurs in the scene at the fabulous Palace of Aklis where Shibli succumbs to the lure of ambition and is fatuous enough to believe that the destiny of kingship is at hand for him.² The "duping damsels" so exercise their blandishments that he "makes an undignified rush for the throne" where he sits "serenely like a Sultan accustomed to sovereignty."³ But soon the damsels leave him in utter darkness, he cannot remove his crown nor rise from the throne, and he knows complete disillusionment.

Worse, he is struck with grief and anguish when he remembers his duty to Noorna that he has been deluded into forgetting.⁴ Throwing up his hands in horror he strikes a gong and receives a shock of surprise:-

. . . . a peal of thunder rolled, and doors flew open on every side, and his throne moved out into the hall, and he saw an amazing sight-a crowd of men, some old, some young, all crowned and all sitting upon thrones.⁵

1 Meredith, The Shaving of Shagpat, p. 157.

2 Ibid., p. 165.

3 Ibid., p. 167.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 168.

Recognizing them for dupes like himself, he wonders how to get at them from his throne, and suddenly happens to see a mirror in which his crown is revealed for what it is--"bejewelled asses' ears stiffened upright, and skulls of monkeys grinning with gems."¹ Realization comes to him.

The sight convulsed Shibli with laughter and as he laughed, his seat upon the throne was loosened, and he pitched from it, but the crown stuck to him and was tenacious of its hold as the lion that pounceth upon a victim.²

Here we have a second and even more powerful illustration of the hearty, healthy laugh as a means of release from folly. The Spirit of Comedy, though not yet conceived in Meredith's mind, is hovering here.

This idea is further carried out when a troop of monkeys which are led into the palace prostrate themselves before Shibli "like creatures in whom glowed the lamp of reason and the gift of intelligence."³ Ashamed and sickened, Shibli loses all his foolish desire to be king, realizing it is no honor to be crowned ape in Aklío.⁴

Leaving Aklío, free and independent, except for the crown which still clings to his head, it occurs to him on his way to the quest of the shaving of Shagpat that if only all the "sitters might laugh at themselves, there would be a release for them and their crowns would topple off."⁵ "He is informed by one of his guides that Noorna is

1 Meredith, The Shaving of Shagpat, p. 168.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 171.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 187.

responsible for helping release him.¹ At that moment his crown falls upon the head of the wise, cautious old monkey who had made a constant study of Shibli and had kept close by his side.² Thus we see here the germs of Meredith's later theory that man is comic insofar as he is the victim of foolish vanity and pretense and that laughter is a healthful therapeutic that restores him to sanity and honest humanity once more. This is, of course, only part of the later theory, but in its initial stages it is very well worked out in this early novel.

Although the characters in *The Shaving of Shagpat* are not developed psychologically nor realistically, there is some attempt to show that Shibli's character does deepen and mature as he recovers from the various blows that fortune deals him and that his own folly leads him into receiving. He begins to learn the power of prudence, plans the plot of the Shaving of Shagpat with great care and caution, learns not to be "puffed up by the after-breaths of adulation" and does not "eat the chick of the yet unlaid egg."³

The plot is carried out successfully with a few minor mishaps from magical enemies whose illusions are easily dispelled. Shibli works hard and cleverly and finally all opposition "melts away."⁴ Everyone is pleased with Shibli as the Master of the Event, and the moral is drawn that:--

1 Meredith, The Shaving of Shagpat, p. 187.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 203.

4 Ibid., p. 243.

. . . who would live in chronicles renowned,
Must combat folly, or a fool be crowned.¹

So Shibli comes to true man's estate after all his trials and temptations (thwackings and illusions) and has "real reverence for the wisdom of Noorna bin Noorka, for it is she who has helped release him from vanity and folly."²

With very few exceptions the critics have failed to recognize Meredith's first novel for what it really is--a significant foreshadowing of his later theory of Comedy and the uses of the Comic Spirit. Canvassing critical opinion among the opposition, we find a typical point of view expressed by W. C. Brownell who condemns Meredith out of hand for artificiality and abstractness. He directs his attack particularly against plot and character which he calls "mere mathematical proof of a demonstration and as such primarily 'tours de force'."³ There is undoubtedly a good deal of truth in this blunt criticism particularly as regards this first experimental novel which is so loosely constructed. In fact, one might go so far as to admit that Meredith's novels, in general, though brilliant, are unquestionably manipulated by sheer and sometimes impudent ingenuity. Other critics, notably J. B. Priestley, concur in this criticism.⁴ The only admission that Brownell will make is that Meredith's imagination "endues his world with indubitable animation."⁵

1 Meredith, The Shaving of Shagpat, p. 245.

2 Ibid., p. 247.

3 Brownell, Victorian Prose Masters, p. 250.

4 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 174.

5 Brownell, Op.Cit., p. 280.

Perhaps the severest criticism of The Shaving of Shagpat is to be found in Miss Lynch's book. She considers it the least interesting of Meredith's novels except as a "remarkable 'tour de force'".¹ She is "bewildered and dazzled by the whole thing which is so confused that it fatigues the over-wrought senses."² She concedes a sense of humor but under the delusion that it conceals a "baleful sneer"; unfortunately she fails to disclose precisely how or why the "sneer" comes in.

Turning now to the critics who approve of The Shaving of Shagpat, we find more real critical discernment among them. LeGallienne praises the novel as a "crowning example of delightful nonsense and the faculty of improvisation."³ He refuses to consider any allegorical interpretation necessary, but is content to accept the book as entertainment "according to its label."⁴

Henderson, on the other hand, speaks for those critics who prefer to think of The Shaving of Shagpat as primarily allegorical in intention, and gives an exhaustive analysis of MacKecknie's interpretation, which apparently Meredith himself approved of to some extent.⁵ Henderson also alludes to the idea of laughter and its frequent recurrence,⁶ but does not pursue the point any further.

One of the most interesting criticisms is that of George Eliot who in two early reviews approves highly of Meredith's work. She commends

1 Lynch, George Meredith, A Study, p. 149.

2 Ibid., p. 150.

3 LeGallienne, George Meredith, Some Characteristics, p. 66.

4 Ibid.

5 Henderson, George Meredith, Novelist Post Reformer, p. 18.

6 Ibid., p. 25.

the novel for good sound practical common sense and as an "admirable imitation" of Oriental "tale-telling."¹ She even prefers it to Vathek to which it bears close resemblances.² She does, however, think the conclusion is a bit too complicated and succeeds in "wearying the imagination . . . but where is the writer whose wing is as strong at the end of his flight as at the beginning?"³

Ellis⁴ and Jerrold⁵ both bestow rather conventional approbation on Meredith's first experiment, whereas our final group of critics are much more penetrating in their analysis. Bailey leads the way in his comment that the novel is significant for the "promulgation of principles later used as a consistent system of philosophy,"⁶ but he fails to elaborate his thesis. He does notice, however, that egoism and sentimentalism are dispelled by the laughter of truth, and also that the aid of woman is important in man's activities--her chidings teach him much--her encouragement strengthens him to retrieve his errors--and she saves him from complete overthrow.⁷

1 Forman, George Meredith. Some Early Appreciations, pp. 31-40. Quoted from The Leader, January 5, 1856 and The Westminster Review, April, 1856.

2 Ibid.

3 Forman, Op. Cit., p. 40.

4 Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 79. "a wonderful work of art, original and distinctive."

5 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Toward Appreciation, p. 34. "The work is an absolute triumph in the realm of pure imagination."

6 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, pp. 38-39.

7 Ibid.

Beach, in his chapter called "The Sword of Common Sense," makes a most illuminating examination of the novel in spite of the fact that it is impossible to agree with his dictum that the story is "not comic but gives promise of comedy to come."¹ It is true, of course, that the comedy borders more closely on burlesque than is usual in Meredith's more mature fiction, but, as we have already pointed out, there are at least two scenes that are rich in comedy. Beach does admit the book is colored with "incomparable drollery" and that the scenes connected with the shaving are a "rare fantastic blend of the humorous and the poetical."² He says there is an occasional incursion of the spirit of fun."³ It would seem that the incursion is much more than occasional; indeed it would not be too much to say that the spirit of the story is more closely akin to farce or burlesque than to comedy, which with Meredith always implied a sober seriousness, paradoxically enough. But his theory of the corrective value of sane hearty laughter to restore a man to reality after he had been blinded by self-deceit or any other fundamental weakness of character such as vanity, egoism, and the like, is a vital and integral part of his ideas on comedy and the comic spirit. And they are illustrated in The Shaving of Shagpat in at least two notable instances already analyzed. The episodes are rather highly colored with youthful exuberance and hilarity, but both incidents are excellent examples of the typical Meredithian philosophy of comedy later to be worked out in the famous essay.

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 27.

2 Ibid.

Beach believes that the theme of Shagpat is significant in the light of Meredith's later work, for everywhere, he says, Meredith is concerned with exploding illusions.¹ But in this early work the "emphasis is upon laughter in relation to the individual alone; the social implications, the cosmic aspect of the Muse is yet untouched upon."² Beach sums up his analysis in the statement that Shagpat is an "interesting statement of Meredith's program and that Shibli is the comic artist puncturing illusions with the Sword of Common Sense."³

One of the best of the recent critics of Meredith is Able whose doctoral dissertation is an excellent piece of work. His main concern is to trace the connection between Meredith and Peacock, but in passing he notices that the "philosophy expounded in the Essay on Comedy had long since permeated"⁴ Meredith's work. He recognizes the fact that Shagpat shows it in "clear but embryonic form," and that its expression is "limited but lucid and psychologically sound in the earliest appearance of the teaching of the Comic Spirit."⁵

We arrive, then, at the conclusion that Meredith's first novel, although not generally recognized as such, is really a clear-cut though necessarily incomplete and immature definition of his theories of comedy.

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, pp. 30-38.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Able, George Meredith and Thomas Love Peacock, p. 37.

5 Ibid., p. 38. Compare Sherman, The Humanism of George Meredith, p. 271. "In Shagpat one may possibly detect the influence of the Comic Spirit of T. L. Peacock whose laughter leaped and flashed upon the humbugs and follies of his day with much of the Meredithian lambency and gusto."

We find a character tested through its weaknesses and triumphing over vanity, folly, and pretense by means of the sane, liberating power of laughter. That is not Meredith's whole theory by any means, but it is a reaching in the right direction.

THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL - A HISTORY OF A FATHER AND SON

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel appeared in 1859 and is usually referred to as Meredith's first novel. It is indeed his first major piece of fiction and contains the first extended expression of his philosophy of comedy later to be embodied in his famous Essay. The work is, as we shall see, curiously uneven and inconsistent in its mixture of comedy and tragedy, but for all that, is, nevertheless, commanding and powerful in its appeal.

The characters and setting conform exactly to Meredith's requirement for comedy. The people he chooses to write about are cultivated folk living comfortable lives in a highly civilized society. They are well-bred, polite, keen-witted, and beyond that, eminently suitable for comic treatment in that most of them betray some weakness or foible or flaw of character that exposes them as vulnerable victims of comedy. Moreover certain selected characters in the story serve as instruments of the Comic Spirit. They maintain a sharp, clear vision which sees pitilessly through the comic faults of their less fortunate companions.

The first eleven chapters of the novel deal with what Meredith calls the "Bakewell Comedy"¹ and are concerned principally with the amusing escapades of a couple of fourteen year old boys. The chief comic significance of these opening chapters lies in the exposition of the famous Educational System of Sir Austin Feverel and its effect upon his young

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, Chapter XI. "The Bakewell Comedy is Closed."

son, Richard, who emerges a bit battered from his first ordeal. Sir Austin, a very upright, severe gentleman, considers all schools corrupt and therefore plans by "parental vigilance" to keep Richard "secure from the Serpent until Eve sided with him."¹ His intentions are of the best; he wants to save his son from some of the misery and misfortune he himself has suffered; but unfortunately he has no sense of humor whatever, and he fails completely to realize the dangers that beset such an experiment in segregation. He enjoys playing Providence to a human being and is totally oblivious of the fact that his errors in judgment will lead inevitably to comic if not tragic results.

Richard's first ordeal consists of a severe test of character. Will he be able to withstand successfully the effects of his first serious wrong-doing and prove himself worthy of all the care and devotion that has been lavished on him by a fond if strict parent? Richard and his very carefully chosen companion, Ripton Thompson, son of Sir Austin's solicitor, are implicated in a most involved scheme of wild adventure and vengeance that calls for their utmost ingenuity to solve. Poor Ripton is faithful but quite unequal to the demands put upon him, but Richard rises to the occasion with all the force of his proud, imperious young character. He does fall into the pit of prevarication² and he is very glad to be able to make full confession of his wrong-doing to his father who is highly gratified that honor and honesty finally prevail.³ Sir

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, Chapter XI. "The Bakewell Comedy is Closed."

2 Ibid., p. 32. The young hero takes refuge in lies from instinct of self preservation, although despising himself for doing so.

3 Ibid., pp. 67-72.

Austin congratulates himself, and incidentally points out to all his friends, that his System has worked.¹

Although Sir Austin is the principal comic figure, his precocious young son exhibits a number of comic weaknesses. Like his father, Richard is proud and self-contained with a strong streak of vanity that brings him to the verge of the ridiculous.² But he is so innately honorable that he is willing to take the consequences of his misdeeds and suffer his punishment like a man.³ Moreover, unlike his father he has a saving sense of humor which helps vastly to bring him out of his first ordeal.⁴ His triumph and victory over himself is very real.

The atmosphere of drawing room comedy is heightened by the presence of a very interesting character who serves as an instrument of the Comic Spirit to point out the weaknesses of others. Adrian Harley, the "wise youth," is also by virtue of his vanity and his unscrupulous morals a victim of comedy.⁵ But he manages to avoid the fatal combination of sentimentality and egoism and can indulge in "Homeric laughter"⁶ at the mistakes of his fellow mortals. He is essentially an unpleasantly selfish individual, smug, self-satisfied, sarcastic at the expense of others, but

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, pp. 67-72.

2 Ibid., p. 43.

3 Ibid., p. 46. Richard suddenly realizes his pride is strangling his common sense. Cf. p. 58 - Encouraged by his "sense of the ludicrous, he lets fly a shout" and the air is cleared at once by the healthy power of laughter.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 8. Adrian likes his "Quiet laugh in a comfortable corner."

6 Ibid., p. 38.

very keen and clever and able to appreciate clearly the ironical comedy of life. In "complacent languor"¹ he enjoys the discomforts of Richard's first "nibble at experience" because boys are such "grave actors of farcical nonsense."² He is equally amused by all the rest of his "blundering kinsmen"³ who provide him with plenty of opportunity for ironical reflections on the folly of mankind.

The second section of the novel deals with the continuing operations of the System as Richard arrives at adolescence. It is here that Sir Austin is exhibited in his worse light as a comic egoist, totally unable to direct the destiny of his son and completely unwilling to admit that the resulting fiasco is his own fault. Thanks to his System which has "isolated Richard in a perfect vacuum," he is entirely satisfied of his son's "innocence and goodness,"⁴ but decides that his son must remain apart from the rest of mankind and their contaminating influence until he has arrived at the age of twenty-five, when it will be safe for him to marry someone whom Sir Austin himself will have selected according to the most scientific principles of eugenics.⁵

The worst of it is that Sir Austin does not realize how ridiculous this theory is and how impossible of fulfillment. He actually talks "nonsense in tones of profound and solemn sincerity" like a "monomaniac"⁶

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 41.

2 Ibid., p. 39.

3 Ibid., p. 63.

4 Ibid., p. 81.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

who thinks he is divinely appointed to reform the whole world. Even the doctor whom he deigns to consult on the subject of Richard's health and well-being is almost convinced by his eloquence, although in the end he remains amused and sceptical.¹

Sir Austin is highly ridiculous in the way he examines Richard every evening yet knows nothing of Richard's "mooning propensities,"² and he is greatly disturbed when informed by his good friend, Lady Blandish, that his son is actually writing poetry. A London phrenologist and a friendly Oxford Professor of Poetry are summoned in to quiet Sir Austin's fears as to his son's abnormality.³ When his father "tenderly" requests him to burn his manuscripts, Richard readily complies, but "all confidence between them"⁴ is lost forever, and there are no more scenes of sympathetic understanding between father and son. The whole situation resolves itself into something very similar to that presented in Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2, except that in Meredith's novel a real reconciliation between father and son is never effected.

A still more ridiculous situation develops when Sir Austin gives orders that there shall be no mention or sight of love in Richard's presence, greatly to the distress of the servants who suffer under Benson's heavy supervision in the matter.⁵ Sir Austin protests he meant only the

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 81.

2 Ibid., p. 82. Sir Austin declares "no Feverel has ever written poetry"-whereupon Lady Blandish retorts that writing poetry is "no sign of degeneracy."

3 Ibid., p. 82.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., pp. 83-84.

"exercise of discretion in public."¹ A very comic minor scene is that between Sir Austin and his sister, Mrs. Doria Forey, to whom he gives orders to dismiss her "love-sick curate" whose appearance is that of an "embodied sigh and groan."² Both mother and daughter are to be banished from Raynham Abbey during the so-called "Magnetic Age,"³ and when Mrs. Forey, who has long cherished sentimental plans for Clare and Richard, asks how long the "Peculiar Period" will last, Sir Austin replies coolly, "perhaps a year."⁴

The climax of this part of the comedy arrives in a scene where Sir Austin confides his schemes for Richard to Lady Blandish.⁵ At a critical juncture of the conversation he gallantly kisses the lady's hand and is caught unaware by Richard who observes the "courtly pantomime" and is now fully initiated into the "great Realm of Mystery."⁶ From a modern point of view the implications of the scene are even more ironical than to a mid-Victorian reader.

The plot continues to move rapidly along with Sir Austin's journey to town in search of suitable material for a future daughter-in-law. A very excellent comic scene occurs when Sir Austin pays a visit to his

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, pp. 83-84.

2 Ibid., pp. 84-85.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 85.

5 Ibid., pp. 90-92. At this point in the plot Lady Blandish is too much in love with Sir Austin to realize he is comic, but she does see how ridiculous his idea is that Richard shall marry at the exact age of twenty-five a girl whom Sir Austin proposes to find for him.

6 Ibid., p. 92. Cf. p. 179. Famous definition applied to Lady Blandish equally applicable to Sir Austin--"sentimentalists are those who seek to enjoy without incurring the Immense Debtorship for a thing done."

lawyer, and the two men compare notes on their respective sons. Sir Austin asks solemnly if Mr. Thompson is sure he understands all Ripton's thoughts and motives, and lectures learnedly on the merits of his precious System until poor Mr. Thompson is completely confused and cannot believe he is listening to "downright folly."¹ The unmasking of young Master Thompson is a great source of gratification to Sir Austin, for it proves to his immense satisfaction how superior his System is.² He is extremely kind to the unhappy and uncomfortable Ripton, and goes off feeling very benevolent indeed, and never realizing at all the humor of the episode.

Meredith insists again and again on the complete blindness of Sir Austin and his fatuous incapacity to understand the problems of youth.³ He points out that one of Sir Austin's gravest errors is his failure to realize that he could have won Richard over to him quite easily, but that instead he makes the fatal mistake of trying to be "jocose on the subject of young men fancying themselves in love" and expatiates on the "Foolish Young Fellow" until poor Richard writhes in an agony of embarrassment.⁴

Lady Blandish is the character who succeeds in exposing Sir Austin's folly, but it takes her some time to arrive at that point, for she is blinded at first by her own sentimental attachment to the baronet and

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 108.

2 Ibid., p. 108.

3 Ibid., p. 149.

4 Ibid., p. 150.

only gradually comes to know him for what he really is--"vain, perverse, and false."¹ Her valiant attempts to open Sir Austin's eyes to his own folly are useless. She cannot "penetrate his mask" and from that moment she grows critical of him and begins to "study her idol . . . a process dangerous to idols."²

Lady Blandish's letter to Sir Austin comparing Byron and Wordsworth and commenting on the latter as a "superior donkey with great natural complacency and stubbornness" is a marvel of tact, and even Sir Austin dimly suspects that perhaps the remark was intended to apply to himself.³ Here we find Meredith's theory of comedy emerging in the following highly significant passage:-

A good wind of laughter had relieved him of much of the blight of self-deception and oddness and extravagance; had given a healthier view of our atmosphere of life; but he had it not.⁴

After Richard's ill-fated marriage, the comedy subsides almost immediately with the one exception of the Procession of the Cake.⁵ Comedy is superseded by Tragedy, and although Meredith has prepared the way carefully,⁶ the reader is not willing to admit the logic in the chain of

1 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 281. Cf. p. 280 - "woman, for whose amusement the farce is performed, will find us out and punish us."

2 Ibid., p. 158.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., Chap. XXXII. Adrian derives malicious pleasure from apportioning bits of the wedding cake to the various relatives. From his "felicitous point of wisdom" all mankind are fools and their "frenzies" are highly comical to him.

6 Ibid., p. 190. Meredith insists on logical outcome of events from natural causes and complains that readers perhaps will not appreciate the fact that in "real life all hangs together."

events and cannot escape the feeling that the final catastrophe is purely wilfull rather than rational and consistent.¹ In one passage we discover that the author himself describes his hero as a "puppet of Fortune."² The plot slides down hill by imperceptible degrees to its tragic conclusion. And the tragedy itself may be criticized on several grounds: it is neither rational nor consistent, it is not inevitable, and it is seriously marred by melodrama.

Very few of the critics pay much attention to the comic element in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, the majority of them confining their analysis to the novel as a tragedy. Among the latter W. C. Brownell describes the novel as Meredith's "one great tragedy" but considers it artificial and unnatural.³ He does give brief mention to Adrian as one of Meredith's very best characters built up out of irony. He adds that Meredith's "talent for irony is less marked than his taste for it."⁴

Forman quotes J. Thomson's criticism to the effect that Meredith is more of a man's than a woman's writer.⁵ Presumably the statement is based on his succeeding remark that Meredith's brand of humor is the broad, jolly humor of Fielding, Sterne, Richter, Carlyle, and Peacock.⁶

1 The comedy "goes on the rocks of sentimentality." H.N. Hillebrand. Recalled from class lecture at the University of Illinois circa 1930.

2 Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 180.

3 Brownell, Victorian Prose Masters, p. 255. Also compare statement attributed to him quoted in Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 203. "The novel assumes to record the remorseless working of relentless fate" but is only a "remarkable piece of imaginative ingenuity."

4 Ibid., p. 264.

5 Forman, George Meredith. Some Early Appreciations, p. 82. Quoted from article in Copes Tobacco Plant, May, 1879.

6 Ibid.

But since no examples are cited, we have no means of following up his criticism.

Some of the critics, like the one quoted above, recognize the element of humor in the novel, without, however, any comment on its comic aspects, which is a very different matter. Jerrold, for instance, speaks of the "kindly irradiation which is often the best manifestation of humor."¹ And Bailey has a word of appreciation for Mrs. Berry whom he considers the only well-balanced human being in the story.² On the other hand, to Miss Lynch Mrs. Berry is a "living bore" without whom the book would be much better.³

Crees is another of the critics who analyzes the novel as tragedy rather than comedy. His opinion of the effectiveness of the tragedy is very high.⁴ Henderson goes even further in calling the novel "perhaps the greatest of his works in fusion of intellect and feeling."⁵

One of John Erskine's essays contains a brief comment on the philosophy behind the novel. Erskine says Meredith's belief in the "great confidence of laughter"⁶ is expressed unmistakably in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. He goes on to say that Meredith firmly believes that man is safe so long as he has the power to laugh at himself.⁷

1 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Toward Appreciation, p. 100.

2 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith. A Study, p. 59.

3 Lynch, George Meredith. A Study, p. 69.

4 Crees, George Meredith. A Study of His Works and Personality, p. 41.

5 Henderson, George Meredith. Novelist, Poet, Reformer, p. 33.

6 Erskine, The Delight of Great Books, p. 255.

7 Ibid.

Since this saving grace of a sense of humor is denied to Sir Austin, his life and those lives affected by his are tragic.¹

Beach also points out that in this novel there is an insistence on the "clarifying virtues of laughter."² Most of Beach's criticism is devoted to an examination of the original version of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel which emphasized the comedy element very much more than later revisions.³ Indeed the comedy was stressed to such an extent that Sir Austin appeared almost as a farcical caricature and received even more merciless ridicule at the hands of his creator than he did in succeeding editions.⁴ Beach admits that the comedy is not expertly handled and that there is not a consistent fusion between the comedy and the tragedy.⁵

In commenting on the excision of the first four chapters of the original version, Priestley's opinion is that "far too much fuss"⁶ has been made about the revision. He dismisses the early farcical passages as "of no great importance."⁷ He criticizes the structure of the plot in the way a tragic conclusion is thrust arbitrarily upon comedy.⁸ Priestley does not consider Sir Austin much more than a "stilted

1 Erskine, The Delight of Great Books, p. 255.

2 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 32-note.

3 Ibid., p. 34.

4 Ibid., pp. 40-50.

5 Ibid., p. 54.

6 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 46.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p.145.

sketch,"¹ but he has high praise for Adrian, without whom the comedy would "lose nearly all its sparkle."² He disapproves of Mrs. Berry, since there is "far too much of her,"³ and she is not entertaining, although he does grant that she is credible.⁴ And he deplores the "alien influence" of Dickens.⁵

In summarizing our critical opinions and conclusions, it would seem that the greatest fault of the novel lies in its structural inconsistency. Its greatest value from the point of view of Meredith's development of his ideas of comedy consists in the cleverness with which the follies of arrogance and sentimental egoism are exposed to ridicule. Sir Austin, who is singled out as a particular target for the shafts of the Comic Spirit, is a significant even though preliminary study in the gallery of Meredith's great comic portraits.

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 176.

2 Ibid., p. 177.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 175. Cf. Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith. A Study, p. 61. "Meredith did more than imitate Dickens--he beat him on his own ground." Also cf. Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to his Work, p. 97 - for a similar comment on the Dickens influence.

5 Ibid.

EVAN HARRINGTON

The popular magazine Once A Week published Evan Harrington serially from February to October, 1860.¹ The first edition appeared in 1861 and a second edition in 1866.² Letters to S. Lucas indicate Meredith's uncertainty concerning a possible title which was finally settled as Evan Harrington or He Would Be A Gentleman.³ There had evidently been considerable banter between Meredith and Lucas, the editor of Once A Week over suggestions for titles, such as The Substantial and the Essential, Shams and Realities, The Tailor's Family, and so on, for Meredith remarks:-

Remember I have called this a comedy. This cursed desire I have haunting me to show the reason for things is a perpetual obstruction to movement. I do want the dash of Smollett and know it . . . I maintain that I avoided making the fellow a snob in spite of his and my own temptations.⁴

Compared with its immediate predecessor, Richard Feverel, Evan Harrington is notable for its almost complete lack of tragedy⁵ and for its constant and successful emphasis on comedy. For the first time it is possible to see Meredith's comic theories in full action even though the degeneration of comedy to farce still continues to operate to some

1 Bailey, The Novels of Meredith. A Study, p. 74. Evident proof of greater popular success than Richard Feverel.

2 Ibid.

3 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 82.

4 Ibid.

5 The death of Juliana Bonner and the sorrows of Caroline are only minor distractions.

extent.¹ It is further notable that Evan Harrington presents one of the rare cases in Meredith where a woman is the object of the comic thrust rather than the instrument of the Comic Spirit, as is more usual with Meredith.

The opening scenes of the novel serve two distinct purposes: first to strike the comic key note of the work and give us an exposition of the family background and motives leading up to the campaign at Beckley Court, and second to introduce to the reader the inimitable Louisa, Countess de Saldar, who is to manage the coming campaign with such eclat. A striking feature of the introduction, and a daring one, concerns the extended description given to the "Great Mel,"² the founder of the family, who has died just before the story opens. Although the "Great Mel" never actually appears as a living figure in the novel, he dominates its most important scenes as a compelling and vital comic force.³

The main situation of the plot revolves around the fact that the three sisters of the Harrington family have all married above their stations, and being unanimously of the desire to keep their humble origin a deep secret, they determine to remove from their brother, Evan, the

1 One of the lesser characters, Jack Raikes, is pure farce with strong Dickens flavor predominating. This is also true of the Cogglesby brothers who are reminiscent of the Cheeryble brothers in Nicholas Nickleby.

2 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 6. Amusing conversation among neighborhood tradesmen gives vivid picture of the tailor who, when young and foolish, wanted to appear a Marquis, but learned that a man who "wishes to pass off for more than he is and impose upon people is contemptible."

3 Chiefly Chapter XXII in which the "daughters of the Great Mel have to digest him at dinner."

shameful stigma of a connection with trade and to make a gentleman of him by hook or crook.¹ The leader in this enterprise is the redoubtable Louisa in whose fertile mind is conceived the idea of the bold stroke of marrying Evan to the heiress of Beckley Court.²

At the beginning of the story, Evan, technically the hero, is a pleasant enough but colorless young fellow whose only strong trait of character is pride.³ He shares his sisters' scorn of trade to such an extent that he plays into their hands and follows their schemes for him much too willingly.⁴ The dangers of hypocrisy and snobbishness face him, but fortunately for him as a hero, he also inherits some of his mother's honesty and stubbornness, and when he learns of his father's debts, he resolutely refuses to accept his sisters' suggestion of abandoning the shop.⁵ The remnants of snobbishness cling to him, however, until the plot is much further advanced, and from the basis of a character struggle and development that eventually makes of Evan a really admirable hero, unlike the weakling he appears to be at the outset.

It is pointed out early in the story that Evan is the fortunate possessor of a sense of humor whose guidance keeps him from going too

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 19. Their chief concern is "to preserve him from tailor-dom, from all contact with trade, otherwise they would be perpetually linked to the horrid thing they hoped to outlive and bury."

2 Ibid., p. 22. Louisa is much admired by her sisters, she has so entirely "eclipsed tailor-dom or 'Demogorgon', as she called it."

3 Ibid., p. 122. He considers "tailor-dom a bitter ignominy."

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 88. He decides he will "not go about bowing and smirking like an imposter."

far astray into the realms of the ridiculous.¹ But there is still a sufficient quantity of folly and conceit in his make-up to provide material for comedy. One of the richest comic scenes takes place in the Green Dragon where Evan to the great surprise of the assembled company, and to his own subsequent horror when he realizes what he has done, admits publicly that his father was a tailor.² He would, of course, never have done so but for "hot fury and the ale."³

In the love scenes between Evan and Rose a touch of comedy is preserved even at the most poignant moments. For example, Evan finally confesses his love to Rose but is unable to bring himself to speak of his origin and his connection with trade. "To-morrow," he keeps saying to himself, "to-morrow I will tell her all. Let her think well of me a few hours."⁴

Much later in the story, Evan, helped largely by his saving sense of humor, begins to see how ludicrous is his own blind folly, and to appreciate how ridiculous is his sister's incessant plotting and planning.⁵ The Countess even feels called upon to reproach him for being as "thick-skinned" as his mother when he actually dares to smile at her

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 87. He cannot help indulging in a "great burst of laughter" at Louisa when she is so relieved that Sir Abraham Harrington happens to die at the same time as the Great Mel, thus offering her a chance to pretend a relationship.

2 Ibid., p. 123.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 242. Cf. pp. 190-191 where Evan, hearing how Rose despises tradesmen, is "off at a fiery gallop, the gall of Demogorgon in his soul." Note Meredith's significant comment that "our comedies are frequently youth's tragedies."

5 Ibid., p. 352.

"excess of grief" because of a fancied insult from the servants at Beckley Court.¹ Her wiles no longer have the least effect on Evan. He is now thoroughly sickened by her "plots, untruth, and coarseness."² His only desire is to "cut loose from the wretched entanglement" and act honorably.³

It is to be specially noted that Evan's salvation is effected solely through his own powers of humor and clearsightedness. No woman acts the part of the comic instrument to point out the hero's weakness. He sees himself for what he is, and his despicable sister for what she is, and at last he turns upon himself "with laughter, discovering a most wholesome power, barely to be suspected in him yet: of all the children of the glittering Mel and his solid mate, Evan was the best mixed compound of his parents."⁴

The chief emphasis of the comedy centers around the Countess de Saldar, who, as the leading spirit among the "daughters of the Shears",⁵ is an astonishingly clever humbug with a remarkable genius for intrigue.⁶ She is a constant source of entertainment and amusement for the reader who can hardly suppress a sneaking sense of admiration at the way she always manages to extricate herself from all dangers

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 352.

2 Ibid., p. 312.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 377.

5 Ibid., p. 16.

6 Ibid., p. 155. A case in point is her clever capture of young Harry Jocelyn who succumbs to her flattery and forgets all dangerous allusions to the "snipocracy."

and difficulties that beset her path.¹ Even though she ultimately goes down to defeat before the forces of honesty,² she remains unsubdued and proud to the very end.³ Haughtily and arrogantly she holds up her head, even when professing to have "given up the world and its vanities."⁴ In the same breath she promises to marry her sister off to a Roman prince if she will only come to the "bosom of the true church."⁵ Her worldliness and unbounded ambition for her family will not be quenched.

Although it is most unusual to find a woman figuring as the leading comic character in a Meredith novel, the Countess is a highly legitimate object for the comic thrust, according to Meredith's theories, in that she is constituted entirely of hypocrisy, conceit, snobbery, and pretense. An amusing part of her campaign is to indulge in "exquisite languors as a sign of breeding."⁶ She has an idea that she looks "more interesting at dinner after reclining on a couch the whole of the afternoon."⁷ Fortunately she has such "robust health" that she is able to "play the high-born invalid without damage to her constitution."⁸ But she is never lazy, although it is "not against her wish that others

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 176. The reader is forced to echo Lady Jocelyn's sentiment, "You must respect her abilities."

2 Ibid., p. 395. Her bitterest moment of defeat is that in which she is obliged to leave Beckley Court in a "dingy fly." Author's ironical comment: "She has fought for a great principle and failed."

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 471. "She renounces the world and turns to realms where caste is unknown."

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 206.

7 Ibid., p. 206.

8 Ibid.

should think she is."¹ Her active mind never stops concocting a multitude of questionable schemes for the advancement of her own social career and that of her family. One of her most doubtful schemes is the proposal of a partridge-shooting expedition though she "despises and shrinks from fire-arms."² The plan is conceived as a desperate measure to create a diversion. In justice to the Countess it must be admitted that her constant intrigues do not have a selfish basis. She is generously concerned about her whole family's welfare, although she has long ago given up her mother as a lost soul.³ It must also be admitted, however, that even her generous impulses are not entirely pure and wholesome. She has "throttled the inward monitor that tells us when we are lying, so grievously had she practised the habit in the service of her family."⁴ But she is as honest as it is possible for her to be in wishing to promote Evan's professional and social advancement.

Her relations with her mother furnish some of the most richly comic episodes in the novel. For example, at the famous picnic⁵ where the Countess is having a hard enough time maintaining the pretense of a kinship with the lately deceased Sir Abraham Harrington, the threat of

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 206.

2 Ibid., pp. 333-334.

3 Ibid., p. 324. The Countess has always found her mother hard to manage, has been able to do so only twice in her whole life, and then by lying "in such a way as to distress her conscience severely."

4 Ibid., p. 330.

5 Ibid., p. 330. She professes not to understand the meaning of the word since she declares she left England as a mere child.

her mother's approaching visit turns her blood "deadly chill."¹ She knows all too well that her mother never opens her mouth "save to deliver facts," which to the Countess is the "sign of atrocious vulgarity."²

Unluckily for the Countess a complication ensues when a steward of Sir Abraham's estate appears, and detection and exposure is dangerously near, but the Countess manages very wittily to hold up her end of the conversation and feels that "over simple mortals success is positive."³ Alas, just as she is putting the "final feather-like touch to her triumph,"⁴ Mrs. Mel is announced. The Countess has "vanquished man but Providence opposes her."⁵ Mrs. Mel bluntly declares Evan the son of a tailor, says he is "playing the lord" like his father before him, and she has come to take him home.⁶ The Countess is, for once, unable to utter a word. She suffers real agony and is ready to believe Sir Abraham's ghost has "struck this blow."⁷ It is one of her worst moments, and after Mrs. Mel has stalked off, she is able to retrieve herself only by subduing the insane Captain Evremonde and thus winning the admiration of all.⁸

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 318. Her most outspoken criticism of her mother is that she is "so vilely plain of speech."

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 335.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 336.

7 Ibid., p. 337

8 Ibid., p. 339.

One of the finest comic scenes occurs toward the end of the novel when the Countess is ordered by Evan to leave Beckley Court.¹ She is amazed and annoyed by her brother's incomprehensible behavior but puts on a magnificent piece of acting and presents an outward calmness of countenance, like "some majestic lighthouse gleaming over the tumult of a midnight sea."²

Finally the "curtain of the fourth act of the comedy commiseratingly drops upon the dire distress"³ of the Countess. There is nothing left for her but to contemplate the consolations of the Catholic religion. She does so wholeheartedly and keeps up her characteristic nonchalance consistently till the very end.

The Countess remains the dominating comic character. The rest of the characters possess only minor comic possibilities. Jack Raikes and the Cogglesby brothers are not comic at all in the true Meredithian sense of the word. They are pure farce with a strong flavor of Dickens influence. In one instance at least Raikes is severely condemned by his creator as a "born buffoon." It is very rare that Meredith tolerates a dull fellow among his usually sparkling and witty characters.

Rose Jocelyn, the attractive little heroine of the love story, does contain minor comic possibilities in that she is impregnated with class consciousness to such an extent that it is difficult for her to throw off the shackles of snobbishness. During the chapter entitled

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 385.

2 Ibid., p. 386.

3 Ibid., p. 396.

4 Ibid., p. 378.

"A Skirmish between Rose and Evan," Rose observes, "we don't want teachers to be gentlemen," apropos of Evan's suggestion that Raikes should be engaged as Latin tutor for Juliana, and the objection is raised that Raikes is no gentleman.¹ Rose is very petulant about Evan's associating with trades people. "It gives one all sorts of suspicions," she remarks.² Fortunately Rose has enough common sense and innate honesty to overcome the snobbishness that threatens to destroy her happiness. But even at the close of the story, the author comments slyly that Rose is still "doubtful whether it is really in Nature's power, unaided by family-portraits, coat-of-arms, ball-room practise, and at least one small phial of Essence of Society, to make a Gentleman."³

Among the critics, both Bailey and Beach point out the obvious parallel between Louisa and Becky Sharp.⁴ Bailey considers Louisa, however, far less repellent, and so good a manager that "we feel guilty" for laughing at her.⁵ Perhaps it would not be very safe to compare Louisa to Falstaff, but at least it is possible to comment favorably, as Bailey does, on the artistic quality of Louisa's lying.⁶ The manner in which she succeeds in subduing her conscience is nothing short of

1 Meredith, Evan Harrington, p. 169.

2 Ibid., p. 171. Cf. pp. 190-191. Scene in which the maid, Polly Wheedle, thinks it would be degrading to hear "one's intended called a snip . . . it is a word--snip--that makes you seem to despise yourself." The parallel is obvious and illuminating.

3 Ibid., p. 439.

4 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, p. 70. Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 67.

5 Bailey, Op. Cit., p. 71.

6 Ibid., p. 70.

artistic perfection. She may not be Falstaffian in appearance, but her quick wit and ingenuity is equaled only by that of the "fat rogue."

Beach devotes a good deal of space to a discussion of snobbery as the prevailing theme in Evan Harrington, and although he does not consider it so typical a Meredithian theme as that of egoism or sentimentality, he recognizes its importance and notes its recurrence in such works as Sandra Belloni, Harry Richmond, The House on the Beach, and General Ople and Lady Camper.¹ He comments at considerable length on Louisa as an example of the "parvenu snob" who would willingly sacrifice anything for ambition.² Whereas Evan possesses the "rudiments of snobbish instincts common to us all," Louisa has them in such exaggerated form that the results are highly ludicrous.³

The resemblance between Louisa and Becky Sharp is also noted by Lynch who agrees that Louisa is more likable and generous, never declining into the shabby adventuress.⁴ Bedford calls the Countess, the "Queen of Humbugs."⁵ And Priestley considers her delightful and even admirable. He heaps scorn upon those "naive and sentimental" critics who dislike her because she is detestable, for "never was snobbery served with such wit, charm, energy, and courage."⁶

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 56.

2 Ibid., p. 66. Beach remarks that the "parvenu snob is more thorough-going than any other kind."

3 Ibid., p. 76.

4 Lynch, George Meredith. A Study, p. 93.

5 Bedford, The Heroines of George Meredith, p. 66.

6 Priestley, George Meredith, pp. 176-177.

Priestley enters vigorous protest against the Dickens influence which he deprecates as irritating and mechanical.¹ Curiously enough, Meredith himself considered Dickens merely an "ephemeral popular novelist,"² yet in the characters of Raikes and the Cogglesby brothers, he imitated the worst features of Dickens and created characters fully as incredible and preposterous as Alfred Jingle and Dick Swiveler.

Crees is another critic who comments on the "Pickwickian vein" in *Evan Harrington*.³ He dismisses the whole performance rather lightly as a "diverting extravaganza."⁴ Apparently he sees no serious significance either in the theme of the novel or in any of its characters.

It is probably very natural for Ellis to resent the novel as a "bitter transcript of family history."⁵ In his opinion the work is a "sort of safety valve" to give "vent to long-repressed emotion."⁶ He considers the story "entertaining but absurd and impossible, for no children of tailordom could have kept up the farce of denying their origin."⁷ He is sure that Meredith must have "wanted to pay off old grudges" when he created characters that were so "insolent and ill-bred."⁸ The only credit he will allow the author is that the feminine characters

1 Priestley, George Meredith, pp. 176-177.

2 Ibid.

3 Crees, George Meredith, p. 198.

4 Ibid., p. 63.

5 Ellis, George Meredith, p. 49. Ellis' grandmother was an aunt to Meredith.

6 Ibid., p. 139.

7 Ibid., p. 132.

8 Ibid.

are alive, vivid, and real.¹

There is no particular criticism in Gretton of Evan Harrington as comedy except for the brief statement that the work is an expression of Meredith's faith in "earth's training of those who are teachable, who are fools only for a season."² The criticism is thus centered on the character development of the hero with no special emphasis on other aspects of the work.

Jerrold's criticism is centered chiefly on technical aspects of the plot which he considers, because of its complexity, to be superior to that of Richard Feverel.³ He calls the novel a "prose sartoriad--a wonderful adaptation of Sartor Resartus."⁴

The enthusiasm of Sencourt leads him to the statement that Evan Harrington is one of the "most excellent romantic comedies since As You Like It."⁵ In his opinion the novel is a "reaction to the whole social atmosphere of the period" when the middle classes worshipped the nobility, the more passionately the nearer they came to it."⁶

Contemporary critical reaction to the novel was not entirely favorable. Among the adverse criticism is the pronouncement of Allan Monkhouse that Louisa is too vulgar to be a great comic character.⁷

1 Ellis, George Meredith, p. 132.

2 Gretton, The Writings of Meredith, p. 47. Similar statement to be found in author's earlier work: Henderson, George Meredith, p. 51.

3 Jerrold, George Meredith, p. 104.

4 Ibid., p. 101.

5 Sencourt, Life of Meredith, p. 117.

6 Ibid., p. 118.

7 Quoted in Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 207.

Another very interesting piece of criticism prophesies that Evan Harrington will probably be forgotten in a short time, since it is not a "great work but a remarkable one and deserves a front place in the literature that is ranked as avowedly not destined to endure."¹

From the critical vantage point of an eighty year interval it is pleasant to be able to retort that Evan Harrington, far from being ephemeral, seems fairly secure in its own literary niche. It might not be safe to claim for it a position among the immortal works of literature of all time, yet it undoubtedly occupies a safe place in the modest ranks of prose comedy. It has high entertainment value and answers perfectly the currently modern demand for social significance. Moreover, to the serious student who is interested in watching the development of Meredith's powers as a novelist, Evan Harrington marks a distinct step forward in the line of his achievement. And from the aspect of his theories of comedy it is enlightening to see how steadily Meredith is marching toward those ideas that are to receive full expression at the end of the following decade.

¹ Forman, George Meredith. Some Early Appreciations, p. 96. Quoted from the Sat. Rev. of Lit., Jan. 19, 1861.

SANDRA BELLONI

Sandra Belloni, thus re-christened in the edition of 1886, was begun in 1861 and published in 1864 under the title, Emilia in England.¹ In 1862 Meredith wrote to Captain Maxse that he has been busily "remodeling Emilia Belloni, making the background more agreeable and richer comedy."² In a letter to Janet Ross, December 1, 1863, Meredith makes a passing comment on the "contrast between a girl of simplicity and passion, and our English sentimental, socially aspiring damsels,"³ evidently referring to Emilia and the Pole sisters. And in January, 1864 the Reverend Augustus Jessopp received a communication from Meredith containing the statement that "Emilia Belloni is not all right. She has worried me beyond measure . . . she will be all right when she's in Italy. As to character, I think you will have no doubt of her flesh and blood. How you will like the soul of the damsel, I can't guess. Out in February."⁴

A considerable similarity is to be noted between Sandra Belloni and the novel immediately preceding it, Evan Harrington. The three daughters of the Shears reappear in the guise of the children of the London merchant, Mr. Pole. Like the Harringtons, The Pole sisters are animated with social ambition, and like them they have an only brother

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith in The Yale Library, p. 86-87.

2 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. 1, p. 75.

3 Ross, The Fourth Generation, p. 150.

4 Meredith, Op. Cit., p. 132.

over whom they endeavor to exert their utmost influence. But unlike the Harringtons, the Poles are less strongly differentiated and far less compelling and vital. No one of them can compare in comic stature to Louisa. Also the resemblance of Wilfrid Pole to Evan Harrington is purely superficial, for whereas Evan succeeded in putting off the taint of snobbishness and really rose to admirable manhood if not actually to heroism, poor Wilfrid, in spite of his creator's pleas for sympathy,¹ never wholly attains true simplicity and sincerity and therefore his character declines slowly, steadily, and rather pitifully.

The Pole sisters, Arabella, Cornelia, and Adela, are open to comic treatment on two counts: they are snobbish and they are rank sentimentalist. As "mere daughters of a merchant," they feel obliged to make their house not simply attractive but enticing," and to that end music "seems an agreeable device."² With this end in view they determine to "scale society by the help of the Arts,"³ and gladly undertake the patronage of the little Italian singer whom Fortune has so providentially thrown in their way.

Meredith refuses to describe them specifically. He says it would be "unfair to sketch their portraits; nothing but comedy bordering on burlesque"⁴ would result. This open disavowal of broad comic intention

1 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, p. 91. Wilfrid is described as a "gallant fellow with good stuff in him."

2 Ibid., p. 2.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 5

marks a significant step away from the method of mere farce and points in the direction of the later theory of thoughtful comedy. Some elements of farce, however, do linger on even in this novel, as we shall see when we come to consider the case of Martha Chump. Although the Pole sisters are not exactly and clearly realized, the reader feels he comes to know them better when Meredith assures him that they are "very ambitious damsels perpetually mounting . . . aiming at they knew not exactly what, save that it was something so wide that it had not a name, and so high in the air that no one could see it . . . their susceptibilities demanded that they should escape from a city circle."¹

For all their haughtiness and their careful cultivation of the famous three shades of distance--Pole, Polar, and North Pole--they are extremely sensitive to ridicule. One of the finest comic scenes in the earlier part of the novel concerns their encounter with their social rivals, the Tinleys, who get the better of them in a cross-fire of wit with thrusts so delicately subtle and piercing that the Poles, for the moment, crumple completely, wounded to the quick.² Usually they are able to hold their heads high and extricate themselves from any humiliating situation with adroitness and finesse, but here the comedy is heightened by their inability to meet the onslaught of sarcasm.

Their determined efforts to pull themselves up the ladder of social success receive further threatening setbacks when Martha Chump appears on the scene of action. She is a wealthy, and, in the eyes

¹ Meredith, Sandra Belloni, p. 4

² Ibid., p. 3.

of the horrified Pole sisters, a very vulgar Irishwoman, the widow of an alderman. Their chief objection toward her is her pursuit of their father, who was her "old flame" and is now her "present trustee."¹ It makes no difference to them that Mrs. Chump and Mr. Pole are really very congenial cronies and enjoy each other's company immensely. They had fought against her in London and now that they are settled advantageously at Brookfield, they declare she is "not to be endured"--an "exuberant vegetable," they cry, "has no place among a nosegay of flowers."²

The real comic contest develops later when their soaring ambitions lead them to contemplate moving from Brookfield which has become too limited for them. They begin to feel that their "honour is pledged to purchase the surpassing family seat"³ at Besworth. Their brother, Wilfried, approves their choice and urges them on, so that they finally succeed in realizing their ambition, although poor Mr. Pole ventures to protest that Brookfield is good enough for him. He is promptly suppressed. But when he stipulates that Mrs. Chump must be received as an honoured guest, otherwise no Besworth, he plays a trump card. The sisters are desperately frightened at the prospect of being a "laughing-stock to the neighborhood,"⁴ but they have to capitulate. There is nothing else to do.

If they had only been able to foresee what humiliating exposure was in store for them when Mrs. Chump and Mr. Pole appear together at

1 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, p. 22.

2 Ibid., p. 22.

3 Ibid., p. 95.

4 Ibid., p. 98.

the supper following the picnic on Besworth Lawn when both have been "drinking champagne to some purpose,"¹ no doubt they would have followed their earlier inclinations to matrimony as preferable to humiliation if their "darling papa's defective education" leads him to "contract a connection" with "that woman."² It is all a "terrible trial for the children of Fine Shades,"³ and Mrs. Chump's hearty good humour only makes matters worse.

Sentimentality in its most excessive form finds expression in the character of Purcell Barrett, the mouse-poor church organist, who in spite of his poverty is "armed at all points by a consummate education and a most serviceable clothes-brush."⁴ Emilia with her impulsive friendliness introduces him to the Pole sisters who carefully "give him the three shades of distance, tempered so as not to wound his susceptible poverty."⁵ As the acquaintance progresses, they are "stormed by Mr. Barrett's elegant and correct appearance and admit him to immediate intimacy, surprised and pleased by his knowledge of the language of polite society."⁶

1 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, p. 257.

2 Ibid., p. 43. They had always held the view that marriage was the "burial alive of the intellectual woman," and that wedlock was intolerable until "later in life--the age of thirty, say."

3 Ibid., p. 285. Cf. p. 5 where they are termed sentimentalists because they "suppose they enjoy exclusive possession of the Nice Feelings and Fine Shades."

4 Ibid., p. 175.

5 Ibid., p. 44.

6 Ibid., pp. 46-47.

At first the affair which develops between Mr. Barrett and Cornelia Pole, the most human of the three sisters, is treated in a vein of pure comedy. Cornelia, despite her "North Pole armour,"¹ is as much a sentimentalist at heart as Purcell Barrett; consequently they appear to be well matched and about equally comic. Indeed Meredith, speaking in the person of the Philosopher, who acts as Chorus for the comedy, says:

Sentimentalists, though they deserve pity, especially when they are young, for they suffer cruelly, are nevertheless right good comedy; for which I may say that I almost love them. Man is the laughing animal; and at the end of an infinite search, the philosopher finds himself clinging to laughter as the best of human fruit, purely human, and sane, and comforting. So let us be cordially thankful to those who furnish matter for sound embracing laughter.²

But the final outcome of the situation represents the tragedy of sentimentality carried to its ultimate and logical conclusion. For poor Purcell Barrett, weakly "playing at Life"³ finds no other solution to his unhappy problems and becomes a victim of suicide. And suicide, as Meredith sagely observes, is the "luxurious last refuge"⁴ of a sentimentalist.

Wilfrid Pole, a young and gallant cornet of light cavalry, is perhaps even a greater sentimentalist than Purcell Barrett, but his sentimental culpabilities do not bring him to the same fate. His fate

1 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, p. 175.

2 Ibid., p. 174.

3 Ibid., p. 378. "when you will not go straight, you get into this twisting maze, and so the seed of this blooming sentimentalism bears ashy fruit."

4 Ibid.

is more nearly akin to that of Sir Willoughby Patterne--complete humiliation, and poetic justice is served more satisfactorily. Wilfrid's sentimentality is complicated by his strong vein of snobbishness and egoism, encouraged and fostered by his sisters. They love and admire him, but have "now exhausted their sensations concerning his deeds of arms; besides valour is not an intellectual quality."¹ And so he rapidly finds himself becoming involved in their schemes for promoting the family's social rise.

His chief struggles centre about his uncertain love affairs. Emilia's natural, honest spontaneity and her very real affection for him attract him strongly, and he becomes "entangled in a maze of sentiment,"² but is very anxious to avoid any open affair with her. He is too much used to "gilded refinement"³ to be able to appreciate Emilia's frankness. Still, he enjoys playing with emotion,⁴ although he does not wish to risk committing himself to any definite declarations.⁵ Besides, he is not sure she is really a lady, and any lowering of the social barriers would never do.

In Chapter XIII--"a Short Discourse on Puppets"--the author comments on his comic method: "Man studied in puppets," he says, "exhibits his chief value of this amusing species."⁶

1 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, p. 4.

2 Ibid., p. 29.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., pp. 84-89.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., pp. 89-92.

So Wilfrid is stripped of his "heroic trappings," and we see him "shuddering to think he had almost engaged himself to this girl."¹ His only safety seems to lie in "running from her spell," though he hopes she will not be unhappy, "poor little thing."²

Wilfrid's dilemma is now greatly increased by the fact that he is attempting to carry on secretly an engagement to two women "to their common satisfaction."³ He has met Lady Charlotte Chillingworth, whose brother is a member of his club, and whom his sisters would be very glad to have him marry, for she is a member of a noble family. Wilfrid does have the grace to grow "utterly ashamed of his aimless, selfish double-dealing,"⁴ and since he is really beginning to love Emilia as much as it is possible for such a selfish egoist, he makes a couple of faint efforts to secure release from his affair with Lady Charlotte. Unfortunately for him, he has met more than his match in this "resolute, faithful woman,"⁵ and when he makes the irretrievable error of playing the game of sentimentality with her, she easily gets it into her own hands.

One of the best comic scenes in the novel is that in which Wilfrid makes a desperate last attempt to break off his secret engagement to Lady Charlotte. She sees through his scheme and makes him

1 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, pp. 89-92.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 180.

4 Ibid., p. 187.

5 Ibid., pp. 310-313.

squirm in agony by openly asking him his reasons for wanting release. His plea is poverty. He is in a corner and feels himself an awful fool, but at the same time is capable of "perfecting the minor details of an easy attitude against the mantelpiece."¹

But even more critical and comic torture is in store for Wilfrid in his scene of painfully public shame in which he is led to declare undying love for Lady Charlotte with Emilia appearing at the psychological moment.² His humiliation is complete when both women decline to have anything more to do with him. He is reduced to utter disintegration--can "actually say nothing, can hardly look up."³ The punishment of a sentimentalist may not be swift, but it is devastating.

As a study in social comedy, Sandra Belloni, with its chief emphasis on various aspects of sentimentality and snobbishness and egoism, presents a rich field for critical comparisons. Bailey, in particular, points out the close connection between Sandra Belloni and Evan Harrington in the matter of character and plot.⁴ He calls attention to the remarkable similarity between the Pole sisters and the Harrington sisters, both groups of characters being about equal in snobbishness and ambition for social improvement.⁵ It must be noticed, however, that the Poles,

1 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, pp. 310-313.

2 Ibid., p. 482. Lady Charlotte, who has many of the forthright, humorous characteristics of Lady Camper, (The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper) admits that she has stage-managed the whole "absurd scene." It is somewhat difficult to understand why so clear-sighted a woman will tolerate Wilfrid for a moment, but once disillusionment has set in, she wastes no time in breaking off the relationship.

3 Ibid.

4 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, pp. 79-80.

5 Ibid.

as a group, are far less clearly realized than the corresponding sisterhood of the Harringtons. It is very difficult to draw any clearly marked line of distinction among the Poles, whereas the Harringtons each have sharply differentiated individualities which make them very real and alive.

Beach concurs in this view; in fact he calls the Pole sisters "pale characters."¹ Cornelia he does allow to possess a modicum of personality but admits that her sentimentality prevents her from developing any real strength of character.² The other two girls, Arabella and Adela, are almost like shadows they are so weak and colorless.

It is impossible, as we have seen, to make any comparison between Wilfrid Pole and Evan Harrington, other than that they are both idolized younger brothers of adoring sisters who exert themselves to the utmost to spoil them completely in their ambitious efforts to climb the social ladder of success. We have already noted that Evan succeeded in throwing off the shackles of pride, snobbishness, and egoism and rose to be a man, if not a first-rate hero. But he had plenty of common sense and a good rousing sense of humor to aid him; he had something of his mother's sturdy character to help him. Wilfrid, on the other hand, was handicapped right from the start. It is significant that we know nothing of his mother. His father certainly had no particular strength of

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 97. Cf. p. 99--where Beach speaks of the "graded scale of the ludicrous" in Meredith's representation of social snobbery. Cornelia, he says, is "evidently intended to be somewhat apart from the ridicule that falls upon her cruder sisters. The Reader can take a certain sympathetic interest in her."

2 Ibid.

character to hand on. True, he was a successful man of business, a London merchant, but during the course of the story he never exhibits any other traits of character than amiability and only an occasional flare-up when faced with the affectations of his daughters. He remains merely an ineffectual, kindly old gentleman quite unable to cope with his children. Wilfrid, too, has a deplorable vacillation that prevents him from ever becoming a strong character. He wants to please everyone, particularly himself. He runs away from responsibility and shrinks away from reality. He is blind and selfish; in other words, he is, in the Meredithian sense, a comic character. And his punishment at the end, that of being jilted by two women simultaneously, is richly deserved.

Sandra Belloni has, by some critics, been considered a forerunner of The Egoist.¹ Beach believes that in Sandra Belloni Meredith has given us his most original contribution to the English novel--a concept of the sentimentalist as an object of comic treatment.² To Beach this the heart of Meredith's comic method.³ Beach says that Meredith applies penetrating criticism to what we think "most valid and substantial in our civilized nature."⁴ This is higher praise than most critics have bestowed on the novel, although Russell thinks that there is no better

1 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Toward Appreciation, p. 107. Russell, Satire in the Victorian Novel, p. 154. "perhaps the two best understudies in egoism are Wilfrid Pole and Victor Radnor.

2 Beach, The Comic Spririt in George Meredith, p. 86.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

illustration anywhere of his ideas on sentimentality.¹ Although Meredith did not invent the sentimentalist, Russell says, he was the "first to take deep and conscious interest in this species; being especially fitted for it by his own incisive, highly rationalized nature as well as by the spirit of his time."²

Pursuing this line of thought, we find that Curle quotes a passage from the National Review, September, 1907, analyzing four kinds of sentimentality in Sandra Belloni--the worldly sentimentality of the Pole sisters, the patriotic sentimentality (hence more excusable) of Merthyr Powys and his sister, the tragic sentimentality of disillusion in Purcell Barrett, and finally the amorous sentimentality of Wilfrid.³ In this connection it is worth noting that Meredith did allow Merthyr Powys and his half-sister, Georgiana Ford, to be sentimentalists of a sort, but he says specifically that they "serve an active deity, and not that arbitrary projection of a subtle selfishness which rules the fairer portion of our fat England"⁴--in other words, they are loyally and idealistically devoted to the cause of Italian independence. Curle calls Sandra Belloni the "ripe fruit of comedy of the first stage."⁵ Merthys Powys may be an example of sentimentality, but he is certainly not an excessive illustration of the vice. In fact J. B. Priestley goes to the other extreme and insists that Merthyr not only totally "escapes

1 Russell, Satire in the Victorian Novel, p. 254.

2 Ibid., p. 247.

3 Curle, Aspects of George Meredith, p. 225.

4 Meredith, Sandra Belloni, p. 412.

5 Curle, Op. Cit., p. 239.

the lash of the Comic Spirit," but is essentially a mouthpiece for Meredith himself.¹ One would hesitate to say that Meredith failed in his purpose to present Merthyr and Georgiana as types of sentimentalists; they are undoubtedly to a certain extent sentimentalists; but Priestley is right in his criticism that Meredith is more than kindly disposed toward Merthyr. Merthyr is drawn as a steadfast, loyal, dependable soul, and moreover he is Welsh--a man after Meredith's own heart. He may not be very exciting, but he is certainly not comic in any Meredithian sense of the word. And one would hate to call him an "insufferable prig."²

A very sympathetic criticism of Sandra Belloni by Richard Garnett appeared in The Reader, April 23, 1864. The novel was declared "fully equal to the author's former works in humour and power and only less remarkable in so far as it is less original."³ Garnett goes on to say that the plot is a variation on Evan Harrington and that the "gist of the present work is sarcastic but it is a quiet exposure of the evil wrought by these ladies against their better nature."⁴

One of Meredith's more recent critics has condemned Sandra Belloni as "stiffer and less spontaneous than other of Meredith's novels. Despite its imperfections, its stiffness, its longueurs of philosophical

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 174.

2 Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 209. Quoted from a criticism by Ernest Newman.

3 Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 178.

4 Ibid., p. 178.

disquisition, it works out not ineffectively the subtly suggested contrast between sentimentality and reality."¹ And then in a final burst of severity--"Meredith yields to fiercest wrath and cannot forbear tearing sentimentality to tatters."² Perhaps a middle ground is safer between the two extremes of Garnett and Crees; Meredith's comic exposure of the vices of sentimentality and snobbishness is neither "quiet" nor "fierce"; it is steadily and thoroughly effective, like the cutting of a surgeon's scalpel.

As for the minor group of comic characters, the "eccentric--humourous group"³--the most confusing amount of criticism has been expended on Mrs. Chump. Henderson thinks she is "extremely funny" but not "very credible," she and her departed husband being "mere caricatures."⁴ Priestley agrees that she is far from credible⁵ and even goes so far as to label her a failure, due to the "alien influence of Dickens."⁶ He says she is not for one moment to be confounded with the victims of the comic.⁷ Beach has substantially the same opinion--that Mrs. Chump is perfectly natural and unspoiled and has no affectation to invite the malice of the comic imps.⁸ Lynch even attacks Mrs. Chumps

1 Crees, George Meredith. A Study of His Works and Personality, pp. 25-26.

2 Ibid., p. 27.

3 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 175.

4 Henderson, George Meredith. Novelist. Poet, Reformer, p. 76.

5 Priestley, Op. Cit., p. 175.

6 Ibid., p. 175.

7 Ibid.

8 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 105.

(sic!) on the score that she is not typically Irish--"her brogue savours more of the Thames," and her "denseness and want of sensitiveness" are not Irish.¹ A somewhat similar view is expressed by Bailey who calls Mrs. Chump "common and offensive, farcical but repulsive."² The only good word he has to say for her is that she is a Nemesis on the Poles for their pretense and pose, but his conclusion is that she is "vulgar, coarse, and repellent."³ For Moffatt, Mrs. Chump may be a "broad caricature with an element of farce," but she is always "vital and natural"--a "foil to the silly affectations" of the Poles.⁴ There is hardly any agreement of opinion here, although the one fairly common basis of criticism is the element of caricature, which evidently points to the predominating influence of Dickens, as in the character (or caricature) of Mrs. Berry, the good-natured bunch of black satin in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. Even here as Meredith's novels are fast approaching maturity, it is interesting to note the lingering remnants of an earlier fondness for broad burlesque and farce.

The entire novel is not completely successful though it does have some notably inspired passages. On the whole it lacks character vitality and plot integration, and compared with the novel immediately preceding it, fails to mark any decisive step forward in the formation of a theory of comedy.

1 Lynch, George Meredith. A Study, p. 102.

2 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, p. 80.

3 Ibid., p. 81.

4 Moffatt, George Meredith. A Primer to the Novels, p. 152.

RHODA FLEMING

As early as 1861 Meredith spoke of his "next novel" in a letter to Janet Ross. He said, "it is called 'A Woman's Battle'--query--good title? I think it will be my best book as yet."¹ Two months later in a letter to another correspondent, Meredith makes reference to a work called The Dyke Farm,² evidently not yet sure of the title of the novel which appeared in 1865 as Rhoda Fleming. In a letter to Captain Maxse, June 23, 1862, Meredith mentions Rhoda Fleming as an "English novel of the real story-telling order, that must roll off soon."³ And again in 1864 we find Meredith writing to his old friend, William Hardman, that "Rhoda Fleming is a right excellent story."⁴

The general consensus of critical opinion, in spite of Stevenson's unmeasured praise and Arthur Symon's dictum that Rhoda Fleming was Meredith's "masterpiece in tragedy,"⁵ has been that the novel is far below the level of Meredith's best work, and that he undoubtedly was out of his element in tackling a theme involving bourgeois tragedy. It has been suggested that Meredith is here "masquerading as Hardy" with disastrous results.⁶

1 Janet Ross, The Fourth Generation. Reminiscences, p. 104. Letter dated May 17, 1861.

2 Meredith, Letters, Vol. 1, p. 27. Letter to F. M. Evans.

3 Ibid., p. 115.

4 Ibid., p. 153. Letter dated October 24, 186.

5 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 88. Cf. Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 175,6. The suggestion is made that Stevenson's "peculiar devotion" to the novel might be due to its melodramatic character.

6 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 183.

At first glance one might be tempted to dismiss the novel with the statement that since it is tragedy pure and simple, there would be no use in attempting an investigation for any traces of comedy. And yet a closer examination of it, from the point of view of the student in search of even the minutest vestiges of the author's working out and application of his theories of comedy, is surprisingly worth while and reveals many a rich comic touch. These touches of comedy are not scattered on the surface for superficial show, but are essentially an integral part of the machinery of characterization and plot development, and as such throw considerable light on the way in which Meredith allowed his perhaps unconscious undercurrent of comedy to creep into his most serious and solemn attempt at tragedy.

Even though the central theme of the novel is based on the life and activities of the yeoman class of small farmers, a theme obviously unsuited to the author's special interests,¹ nevertheless it is noticeable that here, too, the novelist introduces to the reader two characters who are bent on improving their social condition and determined to raise themselves from their humble and obscure origin to a higher rank of society. In comparison with similar efforts on the part of characters in Evan Harrington and Sandra Belloni, the weak and feeble flutterings of the Fleming sisters here are insignificant and futile. But they do possess a sort of pathetic comedy especially when Rhoda and Dahlia are

1 Occasionally, as in The Farmer Blaize scenes in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, Meredith tried his hand at this type of thing, but this is the only novel in which he tries to make it the point of central interest. It is noteworthy that the attempt is an isolated instance in the whole canon of Meredithian fiction.

described as

strikingly above their class in stature, bearing, and expression no schoolmistress could have taught them correcter speaking. The characteristic of girls having a disposition to rise, is to be cravingly mimetic; and they remembered, and crooned over, till by degrees they adopted, the phrases and manner of speech of highly grammatical people, such as the rector and his lady.¹

This hint of comedy, carrying the suggestion that the Fleming sisters will emulate the Poles or the Harringtons, fails to work out, however, for the rapid development of tragedy precludes any further entrance of the comic spirit as far as Rhoda and Dahlia are concerned. Moreover, the character of Rhoda, as it develops, is too plain and honest and straightforward to admit of the least comic interpretation. There is no nonsense in her make-up. She is a sensible soul. As her uncle said of her, "you never get a compliment out of this gal. She gives ye the nut, and you're to crack it, and there may be, or there mayn't be, a kernel inside--she don't care."²

As for Dahlia, her hope of becoming a fine lady fades miserably. She goes down to defeat so quickly that there is no time left to remember that she actually did start out as a poseur and pretender, albeit in somewhat amateur fashion. Sympathy for her plight swallows up the recollection that a slight tinge of comedy colored her character at first.

There is far more opportunity for comedy in the person of the hero-villain,³ Edward Blancove. He is much more than a mere shadowy

1 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, pp. 3,4.

2 Ibid., p. 72.

3 Ibid., p. 402. "There is a sort of hero, and a sort of villain, to this story: they are but instruments. Hero and villain are combined in the person of Edward."

likeness of Richardson's Lovelace¹; he is a representative not only of the mid-Victorian sexual hypocrite, but also of the perennially dominant male who does not believe in such nonsense as the equality of the sexes. In this respect he illustrates an outstanding violation of one of Meredith's cardinal theories of intellectual comedy--namely, that the two sexes should stand on an equal footing, socially, mentally, and spiritually. To Edward Blancove, purity is a necessary requisite in woman; but not at all important in man. Meredith pictures him for us unforgettably, when he asks himself,

Are not women the flowers which decorate sublunary life? It is really irritating to discover them to be pieces of machinery, that for want of proper oiling, creak, stick, threaten convulsions, and are tragic and stir us the wrong way. However, champagne does them good: an admirable wine,--a sure specific for the sex!²

Inconsistently enough, as befits a hero-villain of comic stature, the cynical Edward later expands his ideal of womanhood to include intellectual females who "can talk to men upon men's theories. All the ladies here take an interest in Parliamentary affairs. It is impossible to explain to you how wearisome an everlasting nursery prattle becomes. The idea that men ought never to tire of it is founded on some queer belief that they are not mortal."³

Edward's consummate and overwhelming egoism is the kind that Meredith delights to attack. There is no denying that Edward has plenty

1 Richardson, Clarissa Harlowe, it has often been pointed out that there is an essential degree of similarity between Lovelace and Blancove.

2 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, p. 85.

3 Ibid., In a letter to Dahlia when he is making a determined effort to break down her resistance and destroy any remnants of affection that she may still possess for him.

of "vigour of brain,"¹ but as Mrs. Lovell says of him, he has "more brains than heart,"² and his lack of sympathetic feeling for others is coupled with a curious over-plus of concern for his own selfish welfare. In other words, he is a coward, but does not want his cowardly instincts to be discovered. He goes to all sorts of trouble to try to "deceive and bewilder a woman's instincts"³ so that his greatly-admired cousin, Mrs. Lovell, will not guess he is making desperate attempts to avoid fighting the duel to which he has been challenged by Robert Eccles. Moreover, he despises Robert Eccles as his social inferior with all the force of his snobbish egoism, and thereby embarks "straightway upon a very perilous course."⁴

Thus in the midst of a tragic plot, we observe the phenomenon of a typically selfish, snobbish, self-deceived poseur who is a favorite subject for comic attack on the part of the novelist. That Edward fails to attain the full comic proportions of a Sir Willoughby Patterne is due to the tragic seriousness of the central theme and also to the fact that Edward's repentance at the eleventh hour breaks down the concept of character that has been carefully built up around him. Edward's repentance and remorse are about as convincing as Edmund's in King Lear and just about as productive of good results.

1 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, p. 41.

2 Ibid., p. 63.

3 Ibid., p. 194. He is conscious of immense superiority, for he feels he has "nothing to fear, since no woman could fail to be overborne by the masculine force of his brain in an argument."

4 Ibid., p. 195.

Meredith does not usually spend much time on fools and simpletons, but here, evidently with the desire to provide a foil for Edward, he creates the part of Algernon Blancove, cousin to Edward. Algernon is simply a fatuous tool in the hands of his brainier relative, but his very fatuousness makes him in at least one notable instance a real comic character. He has been entrusted with the important business of managing the details of marrying Dahlia off to Nic Sedgett, but the whole complex situation is a little too much for him. It was his way to "lean his head back upon downy ignorance"¹ and let things slide along, but now fate has forced him to play a distastefully active part in life. The correspondence which he carries on is described in an exquisitely comic vein. On one occasion Algernon is the recipient of a letter from Sedgett--

a countryman's letter, ill-spelt, involved, and of a character to give Algernon a fine scholarly sense of superiority altogether novel . . . he fell upon it with an acrimonious rapture of pedantry known to dull wits that have by extraordinary hazard pounced on a duller.²

Caustic commentary could scarcely surpass this withering description.

Among the group of minor characters, the most outstanding for comic possibilities is Anthony Hackbut who holds an insignificant position in a London bank, but who wishes to be thought an important and influential personage. At first glance we are tempted to accept him

1 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, p. 246.

2 Ibid., p. 241. Cf. p. 310--"if it is permitted to the fool to create entanglements and set calamity in motion, to arrest its course is the last thing the Gods allow of his doing."

merely as a "chirping old miser,"¹ but we realize later that he was not just a miser. "He was merely a saving old man. His vanity was to be thought a miser, envied as a miser."² His great and only fear is that of exposure and humiliation, and he dreads dying because then it would be known how little money he really had.

His petty economies are described in facetious detail from the moment of his first appearance when he and his indignant brother-in-law, Farmer Fleming, engage in a wrangling and undignified dispute concerning the expenses of his sister's funeral,³ until the very height of the tragic climax when Dahlia encounters him, and he feels obliged to take her into a quiet tea-shop.⁴ He thinks sadly, even then, of the cost, and goes so far as to probe Dahlia unsatisfactorily to see whether she intends to pay for both, or at least for herself.⁵ Finding she has no pride left at all, he mutters,

my sister marries your father, and in consequence--well! a muffin now and then ain't so very much. We'll forget it, though it is a breach, mind, in counting up afterwards, and twopences every day's equal to a good bigcannon-ball in the castle wall at the end of the year.⁶

1 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, p. 12.

2 Ibid., p. 214.

3 Ibid., p. 10. Anthony wrote that he would be unable to attend the funeral since "my place is one of great trust, and I cannot be spared." Yet he did offer "voluntarily to pay half the expenses of the funeral, stating the limit of the cost." His offer was angrily rejected by Farmer Fleming who replied that his "wife's funeral should cost no less than he chose to expend on it" and that he "would honour his dead wife up to his last penny."

4 Ibid., p. 220.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

At the close of the painful interview when Dahlia has solemnly promised to bring her husband to meet her uncle, Anthony Hackbut decides to "write home to the old farmer--a penny, showing that he had considered the outlay, and was prepared for it."¹

The best and most judicious mixture of tragedy and comedy in the delineation of Anthony Hackbut's character occurs during the course of the projected visit to London of Farmer Fleming and Rhoda who are anxious to see for themselves what has happened to Dahlia. Anthony is in deadly terror lest Dahlia may have told her father and sister that her uncle is not "high up in Boyne's Bank."² At the same time he is eager to impress them with his imaginary importance, and to that end he proposes to extend city hospitality to them and the "fun of a theatre,"³ provided they are willing to pay for themselves.

But the limit of his distress is reached when the awful thought occurs to him that it devolves upon him to provide food and drink for his guests.

In spite of the caution Anthony had impressed upon his country relatives, that they should not judge by appearances, he was nevertheless under an apprehension that the farmer's opinion of him, and the luxurious, almost voluptuous enjoyment he had of it, were in peril. When he had purchased the well-probed fat goose, the shrimps, and the cheese, he was only half-satisfied. His ideas shot boldly at a bottle of wine, and he employed a summer-lighted evening in going a round of wine-merchants' placards, and looking out for the cheapest bottle he could buy. And he would have bought one--he had sealing-wax of his own and could have stamped it with the

1 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, p. 229.

2 Ibid., p. 70.

3 Ibid.

office-stamp of Boyne's Bank for that matter, to make it as dignified and costly as the vaunted red seals and green seals of the placards--he would have bought one, had he not, by one of his lucky mental illuminations, recollected that it was within his power to procure an order to taste wine at the Docks, where you may get as much wine as you like out of big sixpenny glasses, and try cask after cask, walking down gas-lit paths between the huge bellies of wine which groan to be tapped and tried, that men may know them. The idea of paying two shillings and six pence for one miserable bottle vanished at the richly-coloured prospect. 'That'll show him something of what London is,' thought Anthony; and a companion thought told him in addition that the farmer, with a skinful of wine, would emerge into the open air imagining no small things of the man who could gain admittance into those marvellous caverns. 'By George! it's like a boy's story-book,' cried Anthony, in his soul, and he chuckled over the vision of the farmer's amazement--acted it with his arms extended, and his hat unseated, and plunged into wheezy fits of laughter.¹

The episode itself takes place amidst the most tragic circumstances, but the overtones of tragedy mingle with the hearty undercurrent of comedy in such a way as to bear interesting and vital witness to Meredith's constant preoccupation with the comic values to be found even in the most tragic situations. Farmer Fleming's character is decidedly not comic, but, like his brother-in-law, he very decidedly objects to any extensive entertaining because it is so expensive. This parsimony is a weakness that is described in terms of comedy on one particular occasion when the Farmer grumbles: "What's the good o' society? Tea-cakes mayn't seem to cost money, nor a glass o' grog to neighbors; but once open the door to that sort o' thing and your reckoning goes."²

1 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, pp. 71-2. Cf. similar ideas of hospitality on the part of Mart Tinman in The House on the Beach when he is confronted with almost exactly the same dilemma.

2 Ibid., p. 27.

There is a small group of minor eccentric characters, humorous in the Jonsonian sense of the word, and therefore comic, although not in the strict sense in which Meredith interprets the term. Dominated by the Dickens' tradition, they are amusing in a Pickwickian fashion. Chief among them are two members of the Fleming household; Mrs. Sumfit, a "kindly, humble relative, widowed out of Sussex, very loving and fat, the cook to the household, whose waist was dimly indicated by her apron-strings," and Master Gammon, "an old man with the cast of eye of an antediluvian lizard, the slowest old man of his time."¹ Both possess the supreme virtue of loyalty to which they testify most eloquently by giving up their life-savings voluntarily to the Flemings when their need is greatest. The final word on the slow-moving Master Gammon is one of serious praise: "others might run and stew if they liked: Master Gammon had chosen his pace and was not of a mind to change it for anybody or anything . . . He was very much in harmony with universal nature, if to be that is the secret of human life."²

Critical opinion has been somewhat divided concerning the merits of Rhoda Fleming. A few critics have praised it unreservedly, among them Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Symons, as noted above. Counted among its admirers, also, is Lynch who commends it as Meredith's "simplest and strongest"³ work, and the "best-told from an artistic

1 Meredith, Rhoda Fleming, p. 12.

2 Ibid., p. 305. Cf. p. 131 for a thumbnail portrait of another briefly sketched humorous character--John Sedgett, the village grocer, "thin-faced, rheumy-eyed, the ferret of the village for all underlying scandal and tattle, who shook his thin wallet of gossip with an enjoying chuckle."

3 Lynch, George Meredith. A study, p. 73.

point of view."¹ The coloring of comedy, however, characterized as "occasional pricks of humor," Lynch considers almost "impertinent."²

A contemporary critical article, appearing October 14, 1865 in the Saturday Review, was one of the earliest expressions of approval. The critic declared that it is a "great comfort to those who admire manly thinking and good English to find that Mr. Meredith has, for a time at least, abandoned the over-subtle and unfruitful speculations upon character and society which made his last novel a peculiarly conspicuous instance of both originality and labour failing to redeem the prime mistake of an ill-chosen theme."³

The French critic, Photiadès, considers the novel as the "most dramatic" of his romances and believes it could be most easily adapted to the stage.⁴ Photiades notices the "alien influence of Dickens" but says that Meredith's fierce pessimism would have appalled Dickens.⁵

Walker would agree with Lynch that Rhoda Fleming is the "simplest" of all Meredith's novel, and goes on to say that it is not, however, a shallow performance.⁶ Like many other critics, Walker does not find Rhoda a charming heroine, especially in comparison with the general run of Meredithian heroines, but he comforts himself with the assertion that

1 Lynch, George Meredith. A Study, p. 73.

2 Ibid., p. 74.

3 Forman, George Meredith. Some Early Appreciations, p. 119.

4 Photiadès, George Meredith. His Life, Genius and Teaching, p. 49.

5 Ibid.

6 Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era, p. 789.

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the real romantic interest centers in Dahlia, who, he says, compares favorably with Clarissa Harlowe, and also with Browning's heroine of The Inn Album.¹

But those who favor the novel as a "great tragedy" in which Meredith exhibits himself for the "first time master of his art"² are very rare indeed. Most critics are inclined to label the book un-Meredithian, although few, perhaps, would go to the lengths of W. E. Henley who considered Rhoda Fleming "such a failure as only a great novelist may perpetrate and survive."³ Henley condemned the novel throughout except for the ending which he praised as highly effective.⁴

Stevenson's headlong enthusiasm for Rhoda Fleming led him to bestow exaggerated and unmerited praise upon it as "the strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died."⁵ This statement is attacked justifiably as "foolish and indemonstrable."⁶ Not only is the plot of the novel "mechanical and obvious,"⁷ but the events and episodes are so "incredible, the latter part of the novel is like a wild dream."⁸ Priestley is responsible for the statement that Meredith looked upon the work in the light of an experiment, never rated it very highly, and

1 Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era, p. 789.

2 Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 210.

3 Ibid., p. 211.

4 Ibid., p. 212.

5 Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to his Work, p. 185.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 186.

8 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 146.

CHAPTER I. OF THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE
ARTS AND MANUFACTURES IN GREAT BRITAIN.

SECTION I. OF THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE
ARTS AND MANUFACTURES IN GREAT BRITAIN.

THE ARTS AND MANUFACTURES IN GREAT BRITAIN
ARE OF TWO KINDS: THE FIRST, WHICH ARE
NECESSARY TO THE SUPPORT OF LIFE; AND THE SECOND,
WHICH ARE NECESSARY TO THE ORNAMENT OF LIFE.

THE FIRST KIND OF ARTS AND MANUFACTURES
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in fact disliked it so much in later life that he advised a correspondent not to read it.¹

A very interesting variation of critical opinion occurs in the consideration of the character and career of Edward Blencowe. One critic lays down the law that Edward's villainy is so "cool we can not believe in his tardy repentance,"² whereas another, more lenient, credits Edward with sincere penitence for his wickedness.³ And yet it is Crees who describes the whole work as the "most gloomy and didactic of Meredith's novels--except perhaps for The Amazing Marriage."⁴

Jerrold is the only critic who lists the humorous-eccentric group of characters among the best achievements of Meredith's genius. He praises Master Gammon, an "animated piece of Kentish clay," as a "fine presentation of the narrow, stolid, vegetant farm hand," though he does admit he has heard "true Meredithians condemn him as unreal."⁵

The only critic who makes any effort to apply the test of Meredith's theories of comedy to Rhoda Fleming is Beach who says that the Comic Spirit "rarefies the melodrama" and that the entire career of Anthony Hackbut is "fantastic comedy remote from the commonplace."⁶ Beach considers Hackbut an "imaginative and unusual creation," half

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 33. Cf. Meredith, Letters, Vol. 2, p. 589. Letter to Dr. H. Anders, Nov. 9, 1906--"Rhoda Fleming is liked by some, not much by me."

2 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Towards Appreciation, p. 118.

3 Crees, George Meredith. A Study of His Works and Personality, p. 91.

4 Ibid., p. 90.

5 Jerrold, Op. Cit., p. 119.

6 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 178.

comic, half pathetic, his tragedy being the discovery of his real insignificance.¹ On the whole, however, Beach does not discover much comedy in the novel, though he does think that Blancove's role is "liable to application of the comic moral."² But he does not carry out this line of thought in any detail.

It is, of course, surprising that the element of comedy is allowed any part at all in a novel so serious and tragic, but when one understands Meredith's philosophic contention that all life, even in its most tragic aspects, is permeated and informed with the spirit of comedy, it is perhaps not quite so surprising that Rhoda Fleming possesses so large a proportion of comedy. It is quite consistent and thoroughly in line with Meredith's steadfast belief in the power of the Comic Spirit.

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 177.

2 Ibid., p. 175.

VITTORIA

Vittoria, which is Meredith's only historical novel, was published in 1867 after having appeared serially in The Fortnightly Review from January 15--December 1, 1866.¹ In 1863 Meredith was at work on it. On December 1, 1863 he wrote to Janet Ross: "Emilia in Italy is vivid narrative (or should be). I hope you will like it; I can't guess whether you will."² To the Reverend A. Jessopp on May 18, 1864, he wrote: Emilia in Italy is all story, tell Mrs. Jessopp: no philosopher present: action, excitement, holding of your breath, chilling horror, classic sensation."³ Two months later in a letter to William Hardman Meredith announced: "The New Novel is going on swimmingly. Landys says it is extremely interesting and likely to be by far the best thing I have done."⁴ The author's most extended comment, however, was made in a letter to Swinburne on March 2, 1867:

"My object was not to write the Epic of the Revolt . . . but to represent the revolt itself, with the passions animating both sides, the revival of the fervid Italian blood; and the character of the people Agostino Balderini is purposely made sententious and humorously conscious of it: Carlo Ammiani is the personification of the youth of Italy of the nobler sort, Laura Piaveni and Violetta d'Isorella are existing contrasts. I am afraid it must be true that the style is stiff; but a less condensed would not have compassed the great amount of matter."⁵

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 88.

2 Ross, The Fourth Generation. Reminiscences, p. 150.

3 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II, p. 143.

4 Ibid., p. 153.

5 Ibid., p. 189.

CHAPTER I

The first part of the book is devoted to a general survey of the history of the subject. It begins with a brief account of the early attempts to explain the phenomena of life, and then proceeds to a more detailed consideration of the various theories which have been advanced from time to time. The author then discusses the progress of the science of life, and the various methods which have been employed to investigate its secrets. He then proceeds to a consideration of the various branches of the science of life, and the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomena of life. The author then discusses the progress of the science of life, and the various methods which have been employed to investigate its secrets. He then proceeds to a consideration of the various branches of the science of life, and the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomena of life.

The second part of the book is devoted to a detailed consideration of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomena of life. The author discusses the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomena of life, and the various methods which have been employed to investigate its secrets. He then proceeds to a consideration of the various branches of the science of life, and the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomena of life.

- 1. The first part of the book is devoted to a general survey of the history of the subject.
- 2. The second part of the book is devoted to a detailed consideration of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomena of life.
- 3. The third part of the book is devoted to a detailed consideration of the various methods which have been employed to investigate the secrets of life.
- 4. The fourth part of the book is devoted to a detailed consideration of the various branches of the science of life.
- 5. The fifth part of the book is devoted to a detailed consideration of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomena of life.

Vittoria, a sequel to Sandra Belloni, is a story centering around the 1848 uprising of Italian patriots in a revolutionary movement for independence against Austria. It is a serious historical novel expressing Meredith's complete sympathy with the Italian desire for national freedom and liberty, and yet at the same time it is perfectly fair to the Austrian side, although, naturally enough, the chief villain of the piece is an Austrian captain.¹ The novel is crammed with incident and crowded with a host of characters most of whom remain no more than an indistinguishable swarm of conspirators, spies, and plotters. As a result, and also by virtue of its objective nature (on account of its emphasis on action and incident), the novel, unlike the majority of Meredith's work, lays no particular stress on subtlety of character delineation. Hence it is more difficult in this novel to detect traces of the Comic Spirit, although even here the inquiring search may be rewarded with a few outstanding examples.

Among the large group of Italian patriots, one of them, Agostino Balderini, stands out as the most individualistic. He is a man of ironic humour and clear comprehension of the comedy of the situation--he serves as a sort of Greek chorus or running philosophical comment on the course of the revolutionary activity which he is able to make

1 Captain Weisspriess is too much of a wooden stage villain to have much comic value as far as characterization is concerned, though it is definitely suggested that several of his vices are those which the Comic Spirit likes to attack. Cf. p. 248--where he is described as a sensual intriguer, devoted to self-advancement, blind to his own fatuous egoism, holding an unintelligent view of sex, and rejoicing in the "plumes of vanity which offered rewards for the able exercise of his wits."

fun of even though he is thoroughly engrossed in it heart and soul.

Agostino's transfiguration from lymphatic poet to fiery man of action, lasted till his breath was short, when the necessity for taking a deep draught of air induced him to fall back upon his idle irony. 'Heads, you illustrious young gentlemen!--heads, not legs and arms, move a conspiracy. Now, you--think what you will of it--are only legs and arms in this business. And if you are insubordinate, you present the shocking fabular spirit of the members of the body in revolt; which is not the revolt we desire to see.'¹

Besides being an instrument of the Comic Spirit Agostino has one intensely human weakness that makes him a victim of the Comic Spirit. If his character were drawn at full length, his pride and vanity would make him a really comic figure, but he is hardly more than a sketch. Nevertheless it is said of him:

He delighted in the dark web of intrigue, and believed himself to be no ordinary weaver of that sunless work. It captured his imagination, filling his pride with a mounting gas.²

It can scarcely be said that Vittoria has a hero, for Carlo Ammiani, the aristocratic young revolutionist, does not entirely fulfil the requirements. To be sure he possesses the heroic virtues of honor and fiery impetuosity. In fact he reminds one a good deal of Hotspur in his single-minded devotion to a cause he believes to be good. Furthermore he is the accepted lover and husband of Vittoria, but again like Hotspur,³ he fails to credit the opposite sex with

1 Meredith, Vittoria, p. 168. For an interesting parallel compare Menenius Agrippa's "Fable of the Belly" in Cariolanus, Act I, Scene 1.

2 Ibid., p. 169.

3 Compare particularly Hotspur's relations with his wife in Henry IV. Part 1.

THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The first of the great principles of the American Revolution was the right of the people to alter or to abolish their government, and to institute a new one, when it was found to be destructive of the ends for which it was established. This principle was the basis of the Declaration of Independence, and it was the first step towards the establishment of a new and better government.

The second principle was the right of the people to be represented in their government. This principle was the basis of the Constitution, and it was the second step towards the establishment of a new and better government.

The third principle was the right of the people to be governed by laws made by their representatives. This principle was the basis of the Constitution, and it was the third step towards the establishment of a new and better government.

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intellectual comprehension equal to his own. This is one of Carlo's comic weaknesses; another is his instability of temperament which keeps him wavering back and forth between his hereditary aristocratic instincts and his ardently adopted democratic impulses. He imagines himself a democrat but still possesses remnants of a nobleman's contempt for creatures he feels beneath him. Now and then, however, the disturbing thought occurs to him that those whom he considers a "race of bunglers" are sometimes "strangely favoured by the Gods."¹ He is distracted by uncertainty and dogged by the dreadful fear that

there was nothing but plot, plot, counterplot and tangle, disunion, silly subtlety, jealousy, vanity, a direful congregation of antagonistic elements; threads all loose, tongues wagging, pressure here, pressure there, like an uncertain rage in the entrails of the undirected earth, and no master hand on the spot to fuse and point the intense distracted forces.²

This is, of course, far closer to tragedy than to comedy, but in Meredith's thesis the two elemental forces are never very far apart. Carlo's firm honesty and real, though quixotic, honor make him a near-tragic figure. But his egoism and vanity bring him perilously close to the precipice of comedy. The worst example of this weakness is his falling a ready victim to the dangerous wiles of Violetta d'Isorella to such an extent that for no good reason at all he postpones marriage with Vittoria to her great sorrow and humiliation. She mourns but does nothing about it except feel sorry for herself. Laura Piaveni, on the other hand, a good, clear-headed, sensible woman, tries to waken Carlo to his senses. But it is useless. Carlo's vanity is "most

1 Meredith, Vittoria, p. 172.

2 Ibid.

intricate and subtle, like a nervous fluid" so that he is easily influenced into believing he can "diplommatize as well as fight, and lead a movement better than follow it."¹

Later, after the marriage of Vittoria and Carlo is actually accomplished, it is Laura Piaveni who sees clearly that Vittoria is not well-mated with Carlo for he has

an unripe mind . . . he knows Vittoria has wits and courage but will not consent to make use of them . . . she has both heart and judgement--she is merely a little boat tied to a big ship. Such is their marriage. She cannot influence him. She is not allowed to advise him. And she is the one who should lead the way.²

In one of the most dramatic situations of the whole novel--the attempted assassination of Vittoria by Barto Rizzo's wife--Carlo fails completely to measure up to his heroic possibilities. He returns to Vittoria, and Laura Piaveni, representing the Comic Chorus, imagines him saying:

'Be a good little boat in the wake of the big ship. I will look over at you, and chirrup now and then to you, my dearest, when I am not engaged in piloting extraordinary.'
--Very well; I do not mean to sneer at the unhappy boy, Merthyr; I love him; he was my husband's brother-in-arms; the sweetest lad ever seen. He is in the season of faults. He must command; he must be a chief; he fancies he can intrigue--poor thing! It will pass.³

And it does pass, for at the end Carlo's sincerity redeems him; he is no longer self-deceived; but unhappily his vanity has ruled him too long and brings him to tragic destruction. Yet even here the comic spirit operates, much in the same fashion as it does with Alvan. And

1 Meredith, Vittoria, p. 403.

2 Ibid., p. 453. In an interview with the faithful Merthyr Powys.

3 Ibid., p. 455.

when Merthry Powys sadly ponders on the waste of a brilliant young life, he realizes how true it is that "our destiny is of our own wearing."¹ In his final interview with Merthry before he goes to Brescia for the revolt, Carlo admits:

'vanity governs me . . . I need not add that I admired myself. I plunged into intrigues with princes, and priests, and republicans . . . Do you see now where I stand? I know that I cannot rely on the king's luck or on the skill of his generals, or on the power of his army, or on the spirit of Lombardy: neither on men nor on angels. But I cannot draw back. I have set going a machine that is merciless . . . Do not judge me by your English eyes:-- other lands, other habits. And besides, if honour said nothing, simple humanity would preserve me from leaving my hand to perish like a flock of sheep.'

He uttered this with a profound conviction of his quality as leader that escaped the lurid play of self-inspection which characterized what he had previously spoken, and served singularly in bearing witness to the truth of his charge against himself.²

As in Sandra Belloni, Vittoria escapes the lash of the Comic Spirit mainly because of her complete sincerity and whole-hearted devotion to duty and also because she is the fortunate possessor of a healthy and sane sense of humor that saves many a tense situation. In Vittoria there is a slight suggestion³ that her patriotism is motivated partly by vanity or selfishness and that it is a mistake to mix politics and art. But that opinion is held by Mr. Pericles whose materialistic scorn of honor is magnificently Falstaffian. Mr. Pericles rage at what

1 Meredith, Vittoria, p. 484.

2 Ibid., pp. 480-481.

3 Ibid., p. 268. After her flight from Milan, Vittoria reproaches herself as a "coward" and "thing of vanity" and despises herself thoroughly.

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AND ARCHITECTURE
I HEREBY SUBMIT
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IN THE HISTORY OF ARTS
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BY
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he considers Vittoria's folly leads him to exclaim of his protégée:

Was there ever such folly in the head of a girl? It is her occasion:-- Shall I be a Star? Shall I be a Cinder? It is to-morrow night her moment of Birth! No; she prefers to be extinguished. For what! For this thing she calls her country. It is infamous.¹

Mr. Pericles' rhetoric rebounds on his own head and makes him the object of ridicule rather than Vittoria. But Mr. Pericles is a lovable grotesque, not a pure figure of Meredithian comedy.

The light of the Comic Spirit plays briefly on that group of "half-comic little people who have their places in the history of higher natures and darker destinies."² In other words, the same characters who appeared in Sandra Belloni, members of the Pole family, now reduced to Wilfrid and Adela. Wilfrid turns up as Captain Pierson in the Austrian army and is described as a "recognizable Englishman in Austrian dragoon uniform" with the usual touch of "insular self-satisfaction."³ In the presence of Vittoria, Wilfrid has the grace to be momentarily ashamed of himself when he recalls his treatment of the simple girl he knew as Emilia.⁴ But in spite of his engagement to the Countess Lena von Lenkenstein, he is unable to resist what he calls the "charm of old days,"⁵ and easily slips into a situation analogous to the one when he was engaged to Lady Charlotte Chillingworth and at the

1 Meredith, Vittoria, p. 131. Cf. Falstaff's Catechism of Honour in Henry IV, Part 1, Act V, Scene 1.

2 Ibid., p. 443.

3 Ibid., p. 61.

4 Ibid., p. 272.

5 Ibid., p. 286.

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same time cherished a sentimental relationship with Emilia Belloni. Now the tables are turned. For Emilia Belloni has become Vittoria Campa, enough of a woman of the world to be able to play her own game. And Wilfrid is easily duped into a revival of what "seemed to him a superhuman attachment."¹ In reality, Vittoria descended to the intrigue only in order to help rescue the life of Angelo Guidascari who was dangerously wounded in a duel while trying to protect Vittoria.²

Wilfrid is the same old "miserable sentimentalist"³ who has learned nothing from life whatever. His final ruin is thoroughly deserved. He draws no tears of pity for his downfall but only the mocking echo of the laughter of the Comic Spirit. Trying to escape from prison after being injured in a street fight, Wilfrid is attacked by the Amazonian wife of Barto Rizzo.

His struggles were preposterous; his lively sense of ridicule speedily stopped them . . . the inexorable coil kept fast--how long there was no guessing--till he could have roared out tears of rage, and that is extremity for an Englishman

. Sore at all points, tricked and ruined, irascible under the sense of his injuries, hating everybody and not honouring himself, Wilfrid was fast growing to be an eccentric by profession. To appear cool and careless was the great effort of his mind.⁴

The only other member of the Pole family who figures in Vittoria is Adela, now Mrs. Sedley, who plays a very unimportant part in the plot.

1 Meredith, Vittoria, p. 286.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 440.

4 Ibid., pp. 310, 325.

The only reason for noticing her at all is that she is completely unchanged. She has the same languid affectation and the same patronizing airs of superiority. It is amusing to see that she looks down upon Vittoria as a "cantatrice whose gifts we regard simply as an aristocratic entertainment," and then in a very revealing phrase, she says she considers the girl an "intruding opera siren."¹ This opinion is at variance with one expressed earlier when Adela declares, "it will really be agreeable to renew acquaintance with her. Nor will it do any mischief to Wilfrid, now that he is engaged."² Such inconsistencies provide a large part of the comic commentary on a character who correctly impresses the reader as a "born bourgeoisie, not devoid of petty acuteness, who enjoys noble small-talk and the prospect of a footing in Italian high society."³

Vittoria, which is said⁴ to have been inspired by Meredith's enthusiasm for progress, for liberalism, and for the cause of Italian independence, has been praised by some critics as one of his very best works. In fact it has been described as his "crowning achievement of prose romance" by one admiring critic who values it because it is dramatic, picturesque, and vitalized and exalted by a consuming passion for Italian freedom.⁵ Perhaps it is somewhat of an over-exaggeration

1 Meredith, Vittoria, p. 287.

2 Ibid., p. 44

3 Ibid., p. 407.

4 Sencourt, Life of George Meredith, p. 144.

5 Monkhouse, Books and Plays, p. 28.

to call it one of the great novels of the world, as Oliphant has done,¹ but it is certainly easy to agree with the more moderate criticism of Priestley who considers it one of Meredith's most vivid and romantic stories.² It might even be possible to point out that the story has a certain cinematographic quality which would furnish an excellent basis for a film if only some enterprising Hollywood scenarist would undertake to provide a suitable script. Probably even the most ardent Meredith admirer would admit that the characteristically tortuous dialogue would present a few difficulties that would have to ironed out.

A final high-pitched critical appreciation of Vittoria is that of Jerrold who considers it rare that a sequel is as good as its predecessor, but that Vittoria is a "triumphant exception to the rule," and in its own right, an "amazing masterpiece."³

On the other side are ranged the larger number of critics who are inclined to be rather severe in their opinions of Vittoria. The easiest point of attack is the plot which without any doubt is overcrowded with action and incident, and sometimes the author does not take the trouble to clear up the confusion surrounding the logical sequence of cause and effect. One of the contemporary criticisms seizes upon this problem and declares that the plot is "by far the weakest part of the book" with too many "complicated schemes which make the brain giddy."⁴

1 Oliphant, Victorian Novelists, p. 165.

2 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 33.

3 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Towards Appreciation, p. 112.

4 Forman, George Meredith. Some Early Appreciations, p. 141. Quoted from the Saturday Review, February 2, 1867.

Another criticism appearing in The Athenaeum, February 23, 1867 is by Geraldine Jewsbury, friend of Jane Carlyle. In her opinion the reader is "lost in a maze of events."¹ A similar criticism is to be found in Henderson who condemns the whole novel out of hand for its "bewildering complexity"² of plot and character.

That too many characters crowd the pages in "hopeless confusion"³ is the criticism of Bailey who tempers his tone of severity by praising the "stately and commanding"⁴ Vittoria. Moffatt, too, feels that the chief defect of the novel is its lack of real unity with too many irrelevant episodes.⁵

As far as the element of comedy is concerned, there is an almost complete dearth of critical material. Even Beach dismisses Vittoria with two footnotes to the effect that the novel does not add "anything appreciable to the picture of the sentimentalist"⁶ and that Vittoria is "interesting only for the continuation of Wilfrid's indecision in his relations to women."⁷ The critical analysis given above in this dissertation is proof that the usual Meredithian Comic Spirit does prevail even here although not nearly so extensively as in the rest of Meredith's prose fiction.

1 Forman, George Meredith. Some Early Appreciations, p. 147.

2 Henderson, George Meredith. Novelist. Poet, Reformer, p. 88.

3 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith. A Study, p. 90.

4 Ibid., p. 87.

5 Moffatt, George Meredith. A Primer to the Novels, p. 174.

6 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 88.

7 Ibid., p. 169.

The only other critical reference to the presence of comedy in Vittoria is a passing comment discovered in Baker who notices that a tone of "ironic comedy, which is only the other face of tragedy, steadies the tone of lofty enthusiasm" of this "admirable" historical novel.¹

1 Baker, The History of the English Novel, Vol. 8, p. 349.

THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY RICHMOND

The element of autobiography, which appeared slightly in Evan Harrington, appears in far more pronounced form and with even more highly romantic coloring in The Adventures of Harry Richmond, which was published in 1871 after serial publication in The Cornhill Magazine from September, 1870 to November, 1871.¹ Meredith was working on it in 1864 when he wrote to the Reverend A. Jessopp, "I have also in hand an autobiography and The Adventures of Richmond Roy, and his friend, Contrivance Jack; Being the History of Two Rising Men,--and to be a spanking bid for popularity on the part of this writer."²

The novel, an excellent example of the picaresque type, produces an effect of real spontaneity, especially in the irresistible character of Richmond Roy, father of the hero, who was undoubtedly inspired by that same Melchizedik Meredith who provided the background for the Great Mel in Evan Harrington. Meredith told Marcel Schwob that "when Harry Richmond's father met me, when I heard him tell me in his pompous style about the son of a duke of blood royal and an actress of seventeen years of age, I perfectly roared with laughter."³

Richmond Roy, imposter and pretender in the grand style, has something in common with Dickens' immortal Wilkins Micawber; both are cheerful, complacent, happy-go-lucky individuals; but Meredith's

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 89.

2 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. 1, p. 143

3 Altschul Collection, Op. Cit.

extravagantly egoistic creation conforms so closely to the novelist's conception of comic character that Richmond Roy is immediately elevated to the heights of real Meredithian comedy, and may best be described as a combination of Micawber and Sterne's lovable old Uncle Toby, with the added distinction of the inimitable Meredithian Comic Spirit to point out Richmond Roy's laughable weaknesses and errors. There is more pure fun in Richmond Roy than in any other of Meredith's comic characters. The spirit of exuberant farce is so youthful as to suggest similar tendencies in The Shaving of Shagpat and Farina. It is almost the last manifestation of such a spirit before Meredith settled down into his later and more conventionalized manner of highly sophisticated comedy. Here the humor is more predominant and the laughter more nearly on the surface. And yet the character of Richmond Roy is, nevertheless, an easily recognizable type much in favor with Meredith for its comic possibilities.

Delusions of grandeur exhibit themselves almost at once when the impecunious impostor, Richmond Roy, striking at random on a lucky gambling venture, wins heavily on the horses at Epsom Downs and attributes his stroke of good fortune to the fact that he put his stake on "Prince Royal," and with characteristically superb self-confidence assures his young son that he now has "proof positive that in our country it is common prudence to stick to royalty." Perhaps the best thing that can be said for Richmond Roy is that he is consistent in

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 33.

his single-minded devotion to the conviction that he and his son are not only indubitably connected with royalty somehow or other, he is always a little hazy about the connection; but also that both of them belong to the clan of those who are "marked for extraordinary adventures."¹ His remarkably skilful success in implanting this idea in the bosom of young Harry is later responsible for some of the comic traits of character that manifest themselves in the son.

Richmond Roy becomes involved in a quick succession of comic scrapes, one of the most notable being the occasion when he plays the part of a statue at the court of Prince Eppenwelzen in Germany where he has attached himself in an attempt to repair his momentarily broken fortunes.² Surprised by the unexpected appearance of his son, Richmond Roy is unable to maintain his dramatic pose, and the statue comes to life violently much to the shocking disillusionment of the innocent lad who has hitherto idolized his good-for-nothing parent.³ A great scene of confusion follows; the crowd, bewildered and frightened, believe the whole manifestation supernatural. The only one who manages to preserve a semblance of self-control is the elderly margravine who talks "loudly and amiably as though everything had gone well" till after the crowd disperses when she begins to let off "volleys of abuse."⁴

For once the indomitable Richmond Roy is powerless to defend

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 134.

2 Ibid., p. 156.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 158.

himself adequately, being plastered over with bronze paint from head to foot.¹ There is "no thought of laughter"² at least on the part of the spectators, though there may be plenty for the readers of the novel. It is one of those tense moments of solemn comic perception, so paradoxically popular with Meredith. Richmond Roy cannot even talk properly in his usual florid magniloquent style, but breathes gaspingly as if suffering from asthma.³

When he does recover his sang froid, he is his usual imperturbable self. He begs permission to draw a breath, then proceeds with an oratorical air:

As to this exterior--I can only affirm that it was, on horseback--ahem!--particularly as the horse betrayed no restivity, pronounced perfect. The sole complaint of our interior concerns the resemblance we bear to a lobster. Human somewhere, I do believe myself to be. I shall have to be relieved of my shell before I can at all satisfactorily proclaim the fact. I am a human being, believe me.

Have patience: I shall presently stand unshelled. I have much to relate; you likewise have your narrative in store. That you should have lit on me at the critical instant is one of those miracles which combine to produce overwhelming testimony--aye, Richie! without a doubt there is a hand directing our destiny.⁴

With these words, running true to form, Richmond Roy revives images of familiar grandeur as the "father of my heart and dreams" and succeeds in "stirring my torpid affections" though Harry is still

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 159.

2 Ibid., p. 159.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 160.

inclined to be critical and aloof.¹ The next morning, however, they are reconciled and Richmond Roy exerts his old charm over his son during a memorable breakfast scene in which, like Falstaff,² Richmond Ray magnifies his exploits a hundred fold, retelling the story of how he enacted the role of statue and sat absolutely still for fifteen minutes--then expanding the time limit to twenty minutes--a half hour--until finally in a burst of Falstaffian zeal, he declares he sat "invincible for close upon an hour--call it an hour! Not a muscle of me moved!"³

Another situation rich in comic possibilities arises when rumors begin to spread concerning the imminence of a marriage between Richmond Roy and a Welsh heiress.⁴ His very real and sincere desire to avoid marital complications results in some very amusing squirmings on his part.⁵ Harry, who is now beginning to adopt an objective attitude toward his wayward parent, now sees clearly that

active persecution was the breath of life to him. When untroubled, he was apt to let both his ambition and his dignity slumber. The squibs and scandals set afloat concerning him armed his wit, nerved his temper, touched him with the spirit of enterprise; he became a new creature.⁶

There is a slight suggestion that part of Richmond Roy's comic

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 161.

2 Famous "Men in Buckram" scene, Henry IV, Part 1, Act II, Scene 4.

3 Meredith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 169.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 196.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 196

megomania depends on "stimulants of a perfectly innocuous character."¹ This tendency, and a consequent degeneration that sets in, lowers the figure of Richmond Roy from the level of real comedy to a plane of pure farce. His loss of dignity results in a series of wild schemes which he proposes as quite natural and ordinary. One of the wildest is a decision to revive eighteenth century sedan chairs and the ruffled costumes of that period which he has taken a fancy to.² He also enters fervently and embarrassingly into Harry's campaign to enter Parliament.³ Since he has no real political convictions, it is just as easy for him to debate on one side as the other; his immense "store of Tory axioms"⁴ come in very handy for campaign purposes, though his son fails to appreciate his eloquent zeal in his behalf.

The final verdict on this ridiculously puffed-up, pompous figure of vanity is spoken by his now thoroughly disillusioned son who sees him only too clearly as

a tragic rather than a comic spectacle; his exuberant anticipations, his bursting hopes . . . his transient fits of despair . . . were examples of downright unreason such as contemplation through the comic glass would have excused; the tragic could not. I knew, nevertheless, that to the rest of the world he was a progressive comedy: and the knowledge made him seem more tragic still. He clearly could not learn from misfortune . . . I chafed at his unteachable spirit, surely one of the most tragical things in life.⁵

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 354.

2 Ibid., p. 396. Cf. Meredith's comment on Richmond Roy's "curious roundabout reasoning, which dragged humour at its heels like a comical cur, proclaiming itself imposingly, in spite of the mongrel's barking, to be prudence and common sense."

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 396.

5 Ibid., p. 429.

At the end during the scene of exposure Richmond Roy presents an almost pitiful appearance of complete collapse¹ when he learns the terrible truth that all his vaulting ambitions have been kept alive and financed for many years not by a secret government subsidy, as he had fondly thought, but by his own sister-in-law. The only one who enjoys Richmond Roy's palpable discomfiture is old Squire Beltham who calls him a "damned low vulgar comedian mouthing and elbowing your comedy tricks up to the end."² The unappeasable old gentleman heaps invective on the stupefied Richmond Roy and finally exclaims, "I want to see you go and not stand there rapping your breastbone, sounding like a burst drum, as you are."³

The melodramatic death that this lovable, laughable scoundrel meets is a fitting one. There is one last magnificent gesture of chivalry, too, in his attempt to rescue his sister-in-law, an attempt, which like all his other good intentions, is doomed to defeat. He is an entertaining actor to the last, but the futility of all his endeavors marks him as a figure of pathos if not of utter tragedy.

The character of his son, Harry Richmond, is not developed in such bold outlines. In fact, though Harry is at first swept off his feet by his father's charm, and although he is always more or less subject to its spell, he finally breaks away from his father's dangerously

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 503. "He collapsed in speech . . . forsaken of his swamping initiative."

2 Ibid., p. 494.

3 Ibid., p. 459.

insidious influence and stands on his own feet. But he is never a strong character, nor does he have anywhere near the delightful entertainment value of his worthless father. He is somewhat of an idler, somewhat of a prig, and somewhat of a Puritan--a rather unpleasant combination. He never finds a very useful place in society, and it takes him far too long to make up his mind to marry the girl who is much too good for him. Altogether he is not a particularly attractive hero.

What he does have, however, are some fairly well developed comic characteristics that make him worthy of study here. In the first place he has a vein of egoistic sentimentality that marks him out as a comic victim. He is far too romantic in his desire for "bloom and mystery" in a woman, "shifting like the light with evening and night and dawn and sudden fire."¹ He is fascinated by coquettes who flatter him, and entirely overlooks Janet Ilchester, who is too plain and outspoken for him. "She could speak her affectionate mind as plain as print, and it was dull print facing me, not the arches of the sunset."² During this ludicrous stage of adolescent fickleness, Harry transfers his changeable emotions from one girl to another³ until he finally finds himself in full romantic pursuit, most unsuitably, of the Princess

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 206.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 207-208. Harry veers first from Kiomi, the gipsy girl, to Mabel Sweetwinter, the miller's daughter.

The first part of the book is devoted to a general survey of the history of the subject, and to a discussion of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the human mind. The second part is devoted to a detailed examination of the various faculties of the human mind, and to a discussion of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the human mind.

The third part of the book is devoted to a detailed examination of the various faculties of the human mind, and to a discussion of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the human mind. The fourth part is devoted to a detailed examination of the various faculties of the human mind, and to a discussion of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the human mind.

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The seventh part of the book is devoted to a detailed examination of the various faculties of the human mind, and to a discussion of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the human mind.

Ottilia.¹ He has been filled with so much sentimental nonsense about his mythical connections with royalty, fostered by Richmond Roy, that "laughter, with so much to arouse it, hardly had any foothold within me to stir my wits. For if I said, 'Folly!' I did not feel it, and what I felt I did not understand. My heart and head were positively divided."² Harry is therefore a lamentably comic character, because he lacks the power of being able to laugh at himself. If he had only possessed the ability of sane healthy laughter, like Shibli Bagarag in the Shaving of Shagpat, that would have been his instant salvation. He is, however, without that saving grace.

It is a woman who brings him to his senses. The romantic little Princess Ottilia is sensible enough to recommend a course of hard study for him. She rightly judges him "idle and worthless," and her own "serious estimation of life" leads her to the decision that he is "intrinsically of the value of a summer fly."³ So at last Harry "flings away idleness, comes to a good resolution and studies at a famous German University, not far from Hanover."⁴

One very illuminating episode occurs during Harry's University career. Dr. Julius von Karsteg, tutor to the Princess Ottilia, is just as much an instrument of the Comic Spirit as she is, and helps point out to Harry his errors and weaknesses. In gravely ironic fashion the

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 236.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 237.

4 Ibid., p. 237.

highly qualified individuals from various backgrounds. These
individuals are selected through a rigorous process of
interviews and assessments. The program is designed to
provide a comprehensive training experience for participants.
The curriculum includes a variety of topics, including
leadership, communication, and problem-solving. Participants
are encouraged to engage in group activities and
discussions throughout the program. The program is
open to individuals from all backgrounds and is
designed to be inclusive and welcoming.

The program is designed to be a transformative experience
for participants. It provides a unique opportunity
to learn from experienced professionals and to
develop new skills and perspectives. The program
is structured to be both challenging and rewarding.
Participants are encouraged to take full advantage of
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old gentleman asks him his purpose in life, telling him he understands he is "one of the main drainpipes of English gold--What is your object? To spend it?" Harry is cut to the quick and responds, like a true son of his father, "I shall hope to do good with it." Where upon Karsteg answers, "To do good! There is hardly a prince or a millionaire, in history or alive, who has not in his young days hugged that notion. Pleasure swarms, he has the pick of his market. Yet English live for pleasure."¹

When the professor goes on to challenge him to express a single intelligible idea, Harry realizes bitterly he has not a "single idea ready for delivery."² The beginning of wisdom and self-understanding and enlightenment is his respect for this "master in the Humanities who exacted civility"³ from the arrogant lad. It is not complete release from the entanglement of the Comic Spirit, but at least it is a step in the right direction. Harry thanks Dr. Julius heartily for making him realize that "one who studies is not being a fool: that is an established truth."⁴

Another of Harry's weaknesses that makes him a legitimate prey of the Comic Spirit is his inordinate pride and vanity. He has more than his share of selfish egoism in the form of haughtiness, but comes

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 247.

2 Ibid., p. 351. Cf. p. 256--Harry's desperate exclamation--"it's useless! I have not thought at all. I have been barely educated. I only know that I do desire with all my heart to know more, to be of some service."

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 256.

to realize it in time to save himself from utter folly. He does go to the length, however, of actually indulging in the nonsense of a duel, which he thinks will save his honor, but which succeeds only in plunging him into the depths of despair to which exposure to ridicule has brought him.¹ His lively susceptibility to ridicule is another allied comic trait, inescapable to the egoist. Harry is no exception to the rule. But while he is recovering from the wound received in the foolish duel, he has time and inclination for self-examination and comes to the healthy conclusion that pride is his besetting error and that he must root it out, if he is to survive a normal existence.²

I could not deny that I had partly, insensibly clung to the vain glitter of hereditary distinction, my father's pitfall; taking it for a substantial foothold, when a young man of wit and sensibility and, mark you, true pride, would have made it his first care to trample that under heel. Excellent is pride; but oh! be sure of its foundations before you go building monument high. I know nothing to equal the anguish of an examination of the basis of one's pride that discovers it not solidly fixed; an imposing, self-imposing structure, piled upon empty cellerage. It will inevitably, like a tree striking bad soil, betray itself at the top with time. And the anguish I speak of will be the sole healthy sign about you
 A man's pride is the front and headpiece of his character, his soul's support or snare. Look to it in youth. I have to thank the interminable hours on my wretched sick-bed for a singularly beneficial investigation of the ledger of my deeds and omissions and moral stock. Perhaps it has already struck you that one who takes the trouble to sit and write his history for as large a world as he can obtain, and shape his style to harmonize with every development of his nature, can no longer have much of the hard grain of pride in him.³

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, Chap. XXXII--"A meeting with Prince Otto."

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., pp. 274-275.

Unfortunately, Harry never thoroughly succeeds in shaking off the shackles of pure egoism. A strong remnant of it remains as a constant plague to him. Especially after his election to Parliament, his egoism is colossal. Meredith has this critical comment to make on the situation:

Egoism is not peculiar to any period of life; it is only especially curious in a young man beginning to match himself against his elders, for in him it suffuses the imagination; he is not merely selfishly sentient, or selfishly scheming; his very conceptions are selfish. I remember walking at my swiftest pace, blaming everybody I knew for insufficiency, for want of subordination to my interests, for poverty of nature, grossness, blindness to the fine lights shining in me; I blamed the Fates for harassing me, circumstances for not surrounding me with friends worthy of me. The central I resembled the sun of this universe, with the difference that it shrieked for nourishment, instead of dispensing it. My monstrous conceit of elevation will not suffer condensation into sentences.¹

One of the minor characters who comes in for a share of comic treatment is the Reverend Ambrose Peterborough who accompanies Harry as his tutor on his first triumphal Grand Tour of the continent. His duties, however, are merely nominal, for although he considers himself a paragon of brain and intellect, he is really only a simpleton and fool, and as such, is the butt of many a joke at his expense played on him by that high-spirited madcap, Richmond Roy. Meredith, like his predecessor, Peacock, seemed to be fond of belittling the clergy, and here, as elsewhere,² Meredith takes special delight in holding a foolish clergyman up to ridicule. The kind of comic treatment accorded to the

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 417.

2 Compare particularly Nevil Beauchamp's fierce diatribe against the clergy in Beauchamp's Career, Chapter LVI--"The Last of Nevil Beauchamp"--pp. 519, 523-524.

Reverend Ambrose is admittedly of a very low, farcical, horse-play nature, far from the ideal of comedy which Meredith set up for himself in his Essay.

For instance, after their return home, Old Squire Beltham, who has no other trait in common with Richmond Roy except this one deplorable habit of brow-beating the clergyman, undertakes an argument with the Reverend Ambrose for the sole purpose of showing him up as an egoistic, vain, pompous ass, which he assuredly is.¹ The clergyman finds himself in a tight spot, and "criminal red, attacks the jam-pot for a diversion."² Peterborough hopes he may escape, but the squire "arrests him" to inquire if he "smokes on Sunday."³ Peterborough assures him "openly and cordially" that he never dreams of such a thing, "signifying that they were of one mind regarding the perniciousness of Sunday smoking."⁴ The squire satisfies himself merely by tartly requesting him not to set fire to the ricks, implying that the clergyman will doubtless indulge secretly in the vice.⁵ Dorothy Beltham, in kindly fashion, to "soften this rough treatment," offers the Reverend Ambrose some hot-house flowers for his sitting-room.⁶ And the "garlanded victim" is described as "Cowing" while the merciless Squire Beltham

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, p. 333.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 334-335.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

continues with his baiting.¹ The whole incident is a very curious example of Meredith's failure to live up to his lofty ideal of comedy. It is nothing more than farce, pure and simple, and the Reverend Ambrose is no more than a crude caricature.

As usual in a Meredith novel, the women escape comic treatment--except for a few minor females who appear in the unattractive light of silly coquettes in the earlier pages.² The Princess Ottilia, a romantic little heroine, displays surprising amounts of common sense and intelligence, thereby qualifying as an excellent instrument of the Comic Spirit. And Janet Ichester, who is admirably simple and sincere, receives the highest award of praise from her creator for her complete lack of sentimentality--"she most cordially despised the ladies who parade and play on their sex, and are forever acting according to the feminine standard."³

Most of the critics who have commented on The Adventures of Harry Richmond have given it unreserved praise as a good, first-rate, readable story. Unlike the later Meredith novels, it is perfectly straightforward narrative without any of the tortuous complexities that usually manage to entangle the threads of a Meredithian plot. There is a gaiety and spontaneity about this novel that seem to mark it as the

1 Meredith, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, pp. 334-335.

2 Notably the insipid Julia Rippenger who deserves comic treatment much more than the rustic Mabel Sweetwinter, because Julia is supposed to have a modicum of intelligence and good sense but fails to live up to either quality.

3 Ibid., p. 542.

work of a still youthful exuberance. Sir Sidney Lee says "not one of the author's books rivals this one in invention."¹ And Photiadés, the French critic, admires it because it

pretends to be nothing more than a fine story. Uncurbed by philosophical reservations, Meredith has been able to allow his imagination free scope certainly he has never written a line without being in some degree esoteric, but here, at least, the literal sense is quite sufficient in itself, and one can read the novel without worrying oneself as to what lies beneath it nowhere has Meredith's fancy found such freedom²

Photiadés devotes one lengthy chapter to an analysis of the novel, thus illustrating the regard in which he holds it.

From the Daily News of November 6, 1871 comes a highly favorable review commending Harry Richmond as a "remarkable book expressed with unwonted clearness a careful study in moral physiology worked out under the guise of romance."³ Another contemporary review appearing in The Spectator for January 20, 1872 (Richard Holt Hutton) approves the novel for originality but denies that it is a "first-rate" novel, since it "wants narrative flow and easy simple style."⁴

J. B. Priestley, always an individualistic critic, likes the story, but is severe with it on the score of faulty construction.⁵ He says that after the first glorious half, the novel "goes to pieces,"

1 Dictionary of National Biography, Second Supplement, Vol. II, p. 611.

2 Photiadés, George Meredith. His Life, Genius and Teaching, pp. 73-74.

3 Forman, George Meredith. Some Early Appreciations, p. 153.

4 Ibid., p. 157.

5 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 146.

and the really great scene at the end that brings Squire Beltham and Richmond Roy together is "achieved only after Meredith has taxed the reader's credulity and loyalty to the uttermost."¹ The conclusion, he says, is "flat anticlimax" only relieved by the tragic incident which is "perilously near pathos."² He goes on to say that Richmond Roy is not a comic victim because he is romantic, which seems to be a rather odd and arbitrary sort of distinction. For Priestley, Richmond Roy is humourous, but not comic.³ True enough, Richmond Roy is more romantic than realistic, but even so, the fact that he is indisputably a self-deceived pretender would immediately put him in the category of Meredith's comic creations--and one of the greatest, at that. Priestley does allow Richmond Roy to be classified as a "magnificent pretender, imposter, artist, and knave"--a sort of "Great Mel" raised to a "higher power."⁴ Priestley is also very hard on the women characters in Harry Richmond. He does not think that Janet Ilchester ever comes to life, either as a "greedy, selfish youngster or as a self-sacrificing, mature woman."⁵ And he is equally severe with the lovely little Princess Ottilia whom he dismisses airily as a "pale water-colour sketch of Meredith's greater heroines."⁶ No one would, I think, contend that either

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 146.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 156.

4 Ibid., p. 178.

5 Ibid., p. 183.

6 Ibid.

of these characters approaches greatness, but to say that they are pale, colorless, and wooden, is to be unduly critical with Meredith, and, so it would seem, undeservedly so.

One critic who would take issue with Priestley is Meredith's most recent biographer, Sencourt, who not only considers Janet Ilchester a fine piece of characterization but also suggests that with her firm frankness and common sense she is an imitation of Rose Jocelyn in Evan Harrington, who was inspired by Meredith's young friend, Janet Ross, whom he greatly admired.¹ The truth is, of course, that Janet Ilchester and Rose Jocelyn both represent a type of woman that was a tremendous favorite with Meredith and one that he delighted to draw again and again.²

Another critic who agrees with Sencourt is Bailey whose opinion of Janet Ilchester is very high indeed.³ The only criticism Bailey has to offer is that Meredith has pictured her as such an eminently sensible, clear-sighted girl, it is difficult to understand or accept her engagement to the Marquis of Edbury, who is not worthy of her in any way.⁴ Her escape at the eleventh hour from such an unwelcome alliance he terms a pure "tour de force" and says furthermore, that she "loses a rake only to take up with a stick"⁵ which seems a little unkind to poor Harry

1 Sencourt, The Life of George Meredith, p. 172.

2 Witness such characters as Cecilia Halkett in Beauchamp's Career and Clara Middleton in The Egoist--beautiful young women with minds of their own and not afraid to use them. They are perfect expressions of Meredith's theory that women should be the intellectual equals of men.

3 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith. A Study, p. 113.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

even though he may not be a perfect hero.

Mary Sturge Gretton's critical comment on Richmond Roy as "one of the greatest of Meredith's creations" may be a bit exaggerated, particularly when she labels him the tragic comedian in the whole roster of Meredith's fiction.¹ But when she says that Richmond Roy is "irresponsible yet he keeps hold of our heart-strings,"² we cannot but find ourselves in cordial agreement with her dictum.

One very amusing piece of criticism concerning the character of Harry Richmond himself comes from W. L. Courtney in The Fortnightly, June, 1886--"he is never young--he talks about himself with the 'maladie de la pensée' of a modern age."³ This is rather mordant criticism but it does hit the nail on the head.

There is not a shadow of doubt that in The Adventures of Harry Richmond Meredith produced a delightful piece of fiction able to hold its own beside any similar work of the popular picaresque type. Why it has never attained any great degree of popular favor is a mystery. Perhaps a good up-to-date edition would provide the answer. It would be worth trying at any rate. The story moves rapidly, has plenty of verve and spirit. The action is fast and exciting and the characters are lively and very real even with the strong tinge of romantic melodrama with which they are colored. Surely the novel could match such

1 Gretton, The Writings of George Meredith, p. 102.

2 Ibid., p. 105.

3 Quoted in Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 215.

popular best-sellers of our day as Anthony Adverse or Rebecca on their own ground, and it would be an interesting experiment to see whether it might not even outstrip them.

As far as the element of comedy is concerned, Meredith has here done some of his best work, particularly with the characters of Richmond Roy and Harry Richmond. Here and there in the novel he has slipped back to the level of farce and burlesque, but that is only a temporary aberration, and does not represent a real set-back in the steady development of his theories of comedy.

BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER

Beauchamp's Career, which appeared serially in the Fortnightly Review, August, 1874--December, 1875, was published in 1876.¹ On June 18, 1874 Meredith wrote to M. D. Conway:

Beauchamp's Career is philosophical--political, with no powerful stream of adventure: an attempt to show the forces round a young man of the present day, in England, who would move them and finds them unutterably solid, though it seems in the end that he does not altogether fail, has not lived quite in vain. Of course, this is done in the concrete. A certain drama of self-conquest is gone through, for the hero is not perfect.²

Towards the end of his life Meredith wrote a brief and rather casual critical estimate of five³ of his novels for a correspondent⁴ who had evidently requested him to do so. Of Beauchamp's Career he said, "It does not probe so deeply, but is better work on the surface."⁵

A serious political novel such as this is would hardly leave much room for comedy, and true enough, we find, upon examination, that it contains even fewer comic touches than Rhoda Fleming. And yet at the same time the novel would not measure up to the real Meredithian philosophical standard, if comedy found no place whatever in the treatment of situation or the development of character. Situation comes in for a

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 9.

2 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. I, p. 242.

3 The Egoist, Diana, Rhoda Fleming, Richard Feverel, Beauchamp's Career (in the order given).

4 Dr. H. Anders. Meredith's letter written November 9, 1906.

5 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II, p. 589.

larger proportion of comic coloring than is usual with Meredith, whereas we discover that characterization is less subject than usual to comic interpretation.

The hero of the story, Nevil Beauchamp, is a serious young fellow with a serious purpose in life. Early in his career, before he has really settled upon any fixed goal for himself, he comes under the influence of an elderly political philosopher whom all his conservative friends and relatives distrust as a dangerous political agitator.¹ Under the persuasive influence of Dr. Shrapnel's liberal ideas, Nevil decides to devote the rest of his life to a career of public service and to that end enters upon a political campaign which he hopes will carry him to Parliament where he may serve his fellow men to the best of his ability and help to ameliorate the unhappy condition of the working classes. This, in a nutshell, is the extent of the plot. It is not a highly complicated plot, but it is a highly serious one.

Nevil Beauchamp, although for the most part a sensible and eminently serious young man with worthy ambitions and ideals, has a few outstanding comic weaknesses. He manages to avoid the worst vice, however, that comedy likes to attack--namely, egoism. His real and innate modesty saves him from conceit, and in spite of the fact that he has his own quite decided opinions and loves nothing better than a good hot argument, his "veneration for heroes, living and dead, kept down his conceit."²

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 110. Cecil Baskellett represents the typical point of view of Nevil's family and friends as with "derisive shouts of laughter" he makes all manner of fun of Dr. Shrapnel and his "dupe" Nevil.

2 Ibid., p. 10.

His favorite reading is history, and in particular his favorite work is Carlyle's Heroes and Hero Worship, which he admires with an almost fanatical reverence. Frank honesty and hatred of sham are his best qualities, and "to be a public favourite is his last thought."¹ Meredith gives him the very highest credit when he says:

Beauchampism, as one confronting him calls it, may be said to stand for nearly everything which is the obverse of Byronism, and rarely woos your sympathy, shuns the statuesque pathetic, or any kind of posturing. For Beauchamp will not even look at happiness to mourn its absence; melodious lamentations, demoniacal scorn, are quite alien to him. His faith is in working and fighting. With every inducement to offer himself for a romantic figure, he despises the pomades and curling-irons of modern romance, its shears and its labels: in fine, every one of those positive things by whose aid, and by some adroit flourishing of them, the nimbus known as a mysterious halo is produced about a gentleman's head.²

These are the hero's good points. On the other side of the ledger, however, "the hero is chargeable with the official disqualification of constantly offending prejudices, never seeking to please."³ Moreover at the outset of his career he betrays a youthful hot-headedness that marks him as a special victim of the Comic Spirit. During the magnificent opening scene describing the panic at fear of a Napoleonic invasion of England, Nevil Beauchamp is introduced as an ultra-patriotic young Britisher who feels called upon to write an immediate personal letter of challenge to the whole French nation.⁴ The only person he takes

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 32.

2 Ibid., p. 32.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 9

into his confidence is Mrs. Rosamund Culling, a young woman of spirit and humor, widow of a British officer killed in India, who is now acting as housekeeper for Nevil's uncle, Everard Romfrey.¹ She is greatly amused by Nevil's ridiculous exhibition and his "funny semi-tone of defiance," but at the same time she is "ravished by his English boyishness, and the novel blush of the heroical-nonsensical in it."² She makes an effort to divert him, but her "adroit efforts to weary him out of his project were unsuccessful. He was too much on fire to know the taste of absurdity."³ The whole idea, of course, comes to nothing, but young Nevil attains the height of absurdity when, in a fierce burst of patriotic pride, he cries out, "I dislike duelling, and hate war, but I will have the country respected."⁴ He has already planned a defense of the country, "making bloody stands on spots of extreme pastoral beauty, which he visited by coach and rail, looking back on unfortified London with particular melancholy."⁵

Another comic weakness is Nevil's typical snobbishness about rank and class. It strikes him as a perfectly dreadful state of affairs that "we are evidently a nation of shopkeepers at heart,"⁶ and he broods unhappily over a condition that he is powerless to remedy. Fortunately,

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 9.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 22.

5 Ibid., p. 21

6 Ibid., p. 20. Cf. p. 130--comment on Nevil's inconsistency: his sympathy for the poor versus his expensive taste in yachts--"Did Beauchamp at all desire to have those idly lovely adornments of riches, the Yacht and the Lady, swept away? Oh, dear, no! He admired them, he was at home with them. They were much to his Taste."

however, this phase of his development is only a passing one, and soon, with the help of Dr. Shrapnel, he succeeds in arriving at a real state of social consciousness that raises him to a much higher plane of humanity.

The greatest weakness that Nevil has to fight constantly and never can completely conquer is the over-sentimental, romantic streak that makes him an easy prey to passion. He tries hard to live his life according to the rule of reason, but is never capable of stabilizing his emotions so that he can arrive at a steady, well-balanced proportion. The resulting conflict is partly comic and partly tragic. The first romantic entanglement in which he becomes involved is a chivalrous, quixotic sort of affair. He has fallen desperately in love with a beautiful and attractive young French girl whose parents have already promised her in marriage to a middle-aged suitor.¹ Nevil refuses to submit to any such ridiculous arrangement, and makes up his mind at once to rescue Renée from the Marquis. The only trouble is that Renée herself and her conventional brother, Roland, a great friend of Nevil, are unwilling to follow Nevil's impulsive scheme, and so the whole "mad"² idea comes to exactly the same futile conclusion as his earlier scheme of writing a letter of challenge to anyone in France in order to uphold the honor of

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 65. The Marquis de Rouaillont is described in terms of the Comic Spirit as trying too hard to be youthful, something of an "ogre straining at an Adonis . . . his position was within a step of the ridiculous, for he had shot himself to the mark, despising sleep, heat, dust, dirt, diet, and lo, that charming object was deliberately slipping out of reach, proving his headlong journey an absurdity."

2 Ibid., p. 83.

the whole English nation. There is no elopement, and worst of all, the story leaks out, and Nevil is made the butt of jokes at his expense chiefly by his cousin, Captain Cecil Baskellett, who, like the wise youth, Ardian Harley in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, is fond of cynical mockery at men and institutions.¹ Captain Baskellett's "art" of ridiculing people is that of "humour made easy and that may be why he indulged in it, and why it is popular with those whose humour consists of a readiness to laugh."² In a very illuminating critical passage Meredith goes on to condemn that "art, which is a fine and precious one, of priceless value in society, and not wanting a benediction upon it in our elegant literature, namely the art of stripping his fellow-man and so posturing him as to make every movement of the comical wretch puppet-like, constrained, stiff, and foolish."³

Even after the affair is supposedly over, and Renée is married to her middle-aged Marquis, Nevil still remains in touch with her, and when she sends him a peremptory summons to come to her in France on three days' notice, he imagines that she is calling upon him to rescue her, and rushes off, all his earlier quixotism roused, even though he is right in the midst of a critical campaign for election to Parliament.⁴ He is apparently possessed with a sort of madness; indeed he "thought little of politics or of home, or of honour in the world's eye,

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, pp. 82-84.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 200.

or of labouring to pay the fee for his share of life."¹ He even forgets Cecilia Halkett,² a girl whose intellectual courage and candour he is just learning to respect. He goes off without a word to her, although he has given her reason to believe that he is beginning to fall in love with her. It is Nevil's fate to miss his chances with this fine girl because of sheer stupidity and blindness in failing to realize that she is only too willing to marry him if he would only propose to her in time. On Nevil's part, although not on Cecilia's, the situation between them is reminiscent of Browning's The Statue and the Bust. Nevil does not know his own mind, and the initial comedy tinged with bitterness leads relentlessly to tragedy.

Meanwhile Nevil has left his election campaign to take care of itself and is off on his wild goose chase to France. His foolishness is due to what Meredith describes aptly as "frozen vanity called pride,"³ and also to his dramatic instinct for flattering himself that he is still Renée's romantic hero and that he can be of use to her. When he finally learns that her urgent summons was dictated merely by an infantile, shallow, frivolous whim, just to settle a wager that he will come if summoned, he is really disillusioned and feels himself a dupe.⁴ The predica-

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 200.

2 Ibid., pp. 236-239. Cf. interesting sidelight on the character of Blackburn Tuckham, whom Cecilia is eventually destined to marry. He is the exact opposite of Nevil--solid and authoritative, an exuberant Tory, opinionated and conceited but balanced with a good healthy sense of humor. "His laughter was catching and somehow more persuasive of the soundness of the man's heart and head than his remarks."

3 Ibid., p. 214.

4 Ibid., p. 216.

ment is fraught with comic possibilities, but the comedy is soon lost sight of, for Nevil plays his part gallantly not making any show of his feelings,¹ and the reader cannot escape a warm sympathy for him in spite of the fact that perhaps he does not entirely deserve it. He is extremely likable despite all his glaring faults.

Nevil never learns his lesson. On one final occasion he plays the fool and makes a comic spectacle of himself. Renée, who is just as much an object of comic ridicule as he is, takes the extremely foolish step of coming to London in pursuit of Nevil, and then, after her arrival, acts the part of a coy, hesitant coquette.² Nevil is thrown consequently into an embarrassing dilemma and is "tossed in the extremity of perplexity of one accustomed to think himself ever demonstrably in the right, and now with his whole nature in insurrection against that legitimate claim."³ He even accuses Renee in his heart of lack of "passionate warmth"⁴ because she does not behave theatrically enough to suit his dramatic instinct. He knows he is acting foolishly but is borne down by a "sense of weight that pushed him mechanically on."⁵ He doesn't want to be an object of ridicule but is well aware that his indecisiveness is far from heroic.⁶ Here the comedy begins to turn and take on a different coloring, for with Nevil's

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 216.

2 Ibid., p. 389.

3 Ibid., p. 389.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

torment and self-reproaches and very real suffering, there arises in the reader an awakening sense of pity for so deluded a creature whose potentialities for greatness are so miserably cramped and thwarted by his own limitations. The comedy takes on a tragic aspect.

The truth is that Nevil Beauchamp is beyond redemption as a hero. He cannot save himself. Meredith has often suggested that a clear-eyed, sensible woman, acting as the instrument of the Comic Spirit, can point out to a man the error of his ways and thus give him salvation. But with Nevil even this method fails to work. Two distinctive women made the effort. Cecilia Halkett who was very fond of Nevil and yet keenly aware of his failings, his "mental errors and excesses," had on one notable occasion tried to "descent upon him calmly with chastening rod, pointing to the better way."¹ But her anxiety to cure him was all in vain. When later on, she hears reports of his "unhappy subjection"² to Mme. de Rouaillont, she is forced reluctantly to distrust his steadiness as she has already noted his radical political views and his unorthodox disrespect for religion. She is too thoroughly conventional a young woman to have any patience with a man who obstinately persists on the wrong path.

Jenny Denham, ward of the radical Dr. Shrapnel, is another wide-awake young lady whose affection for Nevil prompts her to make the attempt to prod him out of his complacent self-satisfaction.³ Not even the loss of the election disconcerts him; he consoles himself by the

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 145.

2 Ibid., p. 235.

3 Ibid., p. 247-248.

reflection that it has been only a skirmish and he resolves to keep on battling.¹ Jenny surprises him by asking him pertinently whether he thinks that "incessant battling keeps the intellect clear?"² His reaction is instantly comic: "It was impossible for him to think that women thought. The idea of a pretty woman exercising her mind independently, and moreover moving him to examine his own made him smile."³ He is incurable. Moreover he discloses his own intellectual limitations in failing to appreciate the possibilities of feminine intelligence. His views of sex are too sentimental to bear the keen scrutiny of the Comic Spirit.

Among the Tory contingent the most outstanding character is Everard Romfrey, uncle of Nevil Beauchamp, who is a "noticeable gentleman, in mind a mediaeval baron, in politics a crotchety unintelligible Whig."⁴ He is disgusted at his nephew's freakish desire to go into politics, and conceives a violent and irrational antipathy to Dr. Shrapnel whom he considers a sort of Socratic misleader of youth. His prejudice against Dr. Shrapnel has its foundation in snobbishness and intolerance. Eventually his impatience leads him to make an unprovoked physical attack on the harmless but talkative old gentleman, and from that point on the situation degenerates into a comic tug-of-war⁵ between the pride and obstinacy of

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 247-248.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 248.

4 Ibid., p. 14.

5 Ibid., p. 337. Romfrey's "bearing was truly noble . . . as of a grave big dog worried by a small barking dog. There is to an unsympathetic observer an intense vexatiousness in the exhibition of such pertinacity. To a soldier accustomed at a glance to estimate powers of attack and defence, this repeated puny assailing of a fortress that required years of siege was in addition ridiculous."

Nevil Beauchamp who demands instant retraction and a verbal apology and the equally ridiculous pride and obstinacy of Everard Romfrey who stoutly refuses to admit that he has been in the wrong. The final outcome is complete vindication for Dr. Shrapnel and Nevil with Everard Romfrey exposed to all the assaults of the Comic Spirit as he offers a stiff and grudging apology to Dr. Shrapnel.¹ The long-drawn-out contest is over and Everard's obstinate pride has been deflated. Justice is served and the Spirit of Comedy appeased.

An unusual feature of Beauchamp's Career is the emphasis which is placed on the comedy of situation.² Meredith allows himself an excellent opportunity for an exposé of the absurdities involved in carrying on an election campaign. Canvassing for votes, he says, is a ridiculous procedure of going "obsequiously from door to door; where like a cross between a postman delivering a bill and a beggar craving an alms, the candidate patiently attempts the extraction of a vote, as little boys pick periwinkles with a pin. 'This is your duty, which I most abjectly entreat you to do'; is pretty nearly the form of the supplication."³

One of the most amusing incidents in this connection is Nevil's encounter with Mr. Carpendike, the shoemaker, who has such strong Puritanical objections to Sunday recreation that he refuses to vote for anyone

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, Chapters XLIX--"A Fabric of Baronial Despotism Crumbles" - LII - "Question of a Pilgrimage and an Act of Penance" - LIII - "The Apology."

2 Compare the comic chapters in The Amazing Marriage on the temptations of gambling.

3 Meredith, Op. Cit., pp. 150-151.

who upholds such wickedness.¹ He is a picture of comic stubbornness as he listens with "bent head, upraised eyes, and brows wrinkling far on to his poll: a picture of a mind entrenched beyond the potentialities of mortal assault."²

Meredith reserves his keenest assaults of comedy for an ironical discussion of the possibilities of the rule of Intellect in England which would at once banish all pretence of democratic government. Meredith defends the latter vigorously albeit satirically. Incidentally this whole passage revolves around a criticism of the Carlylean doctrine of the Rule of the Best and Strongest Man.³ Meredith writes:

It is not too much to say that a domination of the Intellect in England would at once and entirely alter the face of the country. We should be governed by the head with a vengeance Criticism, now so helpful to us, would wither at the root: fun would die out of Parliament, and outside of it: we could never laugh at our masters, or command them: and that good old-fashioned shouldering of separate interests, which proves us equal before the law, puts an end to the pretence of higher merit in the one or the other, and would be transformed to a painful orderliness, like a City procession under the conduct of the police decidedly no benefit to burly freedom.

And consider the freezing isolation of a body of our quintessential elect, seeing below them none to resemble them! Do you not hear in imagination the land's regrets for that amiable nobility whose pretensions were comically built on birth, acres, tailoring, style, an air? These, with the traditions of how great people should look in our country, these would pass among us like bags of ice--a pure Polar aristocracy, inflicting the woes of wintriness upon us

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 162.

2 Ibid.

3 Carlyle, Heroes and Hero-Worship, Central Thesis of each of the six lectures.

Briefly, then, we have a system not planned but grown, the outcome and image of our genius, and all are dissatisfied with parts of it; but, as each would preserve his own, the surest guarantee is obtained for the integrity of the whole by a happy adjustment of the energies of opposition, which goes far beyond concord in the promotion of harmony. This is our English system; like our English pudding, a fortuitous concourse of all the sweets in the grocer's shop, but an excellent thing for all that, and let none threaten it.¹

The undercurrent of seriousness running through this argument makes it all the more effective as a strong expression of political opinion.

James Thomson, one of the contemporary reviewers, in an article in Cope's Tobacco Plant for June, 1876, wrote that Beauchamp's Career was "too waywardly humouristic" to be popular, and that "our ladies condemn it vehemently for its miserable catastrophe"; yet Thomson thinks the knot of the plot is worth untying, and "we commend it to the meditative smoker," he says.² In this same connection it is of interest to note that Lady Butcher has revealed the fact that Meredith's own wife was

greatly chagrined at the tragic ending and begged him and implored him to change it. There were some arguments between them on this subject, but though he was sad at disappointing his wife's wishes, he never swerved from his intention, constantly affirming that it was the only possible end for Beauchamp.³

In spite of Meredith's careful defense of his catastrophic conclusion, it has seemed to a great many critics that the tragedy at the end of the novel is gratuitous and un-called for, to say the least.

1 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, pp. 151-152.

2 Forman, George Meredith, Some Early Appreciations, p. 172.

3 Butcher, Memories of George Meredith, p. 42.

W. C. Brownell, one of Meredith's severest critics, declares that the whole plot is "too arbitrary."¹ He objects to the fact that the fate of the hero is "sealed he is a slave of his creator's will."² This is a typical bit of criticism on Brownell's part, for he feels that the great majority of Meredith's characters are mere puppets dangling from strings, and that too many of the major incidents in a Meredith novel are apt to be "tours de force," brilliant indeed, but merely pyrotechnical and artificial.

Another critic, who falls in line with Brownell's objections, is Crees, who condemns the conclusion on the grounds that Nevil's death would have seemed more fitting and been dramatically more effective if he had not previously gone through a critical illness, recovered, married, and apparently settled down to domestic contentment.³ Perhaps the dramatic situation may have demanded his death, but Crees feels that the "creator was hard put to it to inflict the sacrificial stroke."⁴ And yet in spite of all his "glaring faults," Nevil's failure was a "glorious one," and even if he failed of "lasting achievements," Crees believes that his memory will live forever.⁵

1 Quoted in Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 217.

2 Ibid.

3 Crees, George Meredith. A Study of His Works and Personality, p. 57.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 57.

Hammerton expresses himself as in essential agreement with Brownell, namely that the death of the hero is unaccountable,¹ but unlike Brownell,² Hammerton feels a warm interest in Nevil.³ He says, "Whatever we think of the end of Nevil Beauchamp, there can be no two opinions as to the eminence of the novel Beauchamp's Career is unquestionably the novelist at the height of his power, Rhoda Fleming alone among its predecessors ranking with it in intense human-ness and majestic sweep of the emotions."⁴

On the other hand, Oliphant thinks that the casual manner of the catastrophe is symbolic of Nevil's whole career, and that his noble self-sacrifice, though Meredith describes it as a piece of ironic futility, represents his saving grace.⁵ Oliphant is justly severe in characterizing Nevil as far from an ideal hero, particularly on the basis of his unsatisfactory relations with three women.⁶ Oliphant decides that he was probably not really in love with any of them.⁷

An unusually lenient criticism is that of Arthur Symonds who gives the highest praise to the novel as "absolutely faithful to fact, life, human nature, and worldly circumstance."⁸ He even considers Nevil

1 Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 217.

2 Ibid., p. 217. Brownell had said that Beauchamp "challenges our admiration but does not hold our interest."

3 Ibid., p. 217.

4 Ibid.

5 Oliphant, Victorian Novelists, p. 183

6 Ibid., p. 181.

7 Ibid.

8 Quoted in Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 216.

Beauchamp "intrinsically the noblest in nature"¹ of all Meredith's heroes. And he says that in his opinion the tragic conclusion is "by no means cheerless."²

Not many of the critics go so far as this in their praise of the hero. A middle ground, representing a better-balanced point of view, is to be found in a typical statement by Moffatt, who approves of Nevil as spirited and chivalrous with essential elements of real strength, but deplores his tendency to be "deflected by passion."³

One of the best critical comments on the hero is that of Monkhouse who compares Nevil to the idealistically and politically-minded Shelley. Both, he says, are "militant heroes who will not endure wrong nor tolerate a substitute for right."⁴ They are both of such a temperament that they alienate friends, and quarrel with their family and relatives, but both cling to a steadfast faith in work.⁵ The comparison is suggestive and illuminating if it is not pushed too far.

Crees draws for us a fearful picture of what Beauchamp might have turned out to be at fifty if he had been allowed to live. Crees imagines that he would have been a "sorry spectacle, warped, probably a one-sided

1 Quoted in Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 216.

2 Ibid.

3 Moffatt, George Meredith. A Primer to the Novels, pp. 220-223. Cf. also similar tendencies in the character of Alvan in The Tragic Comedians.

4 Monkhouse, Books and Plays, p. 32. Cf. Baker, The History of the English Novel, Vol. 8, p. 359--where an interesting analogy is drawn between Beauchamp and Carlo Ammiani on the basis of similar heroic qualities and quixotic excesses.

5 Ibid.

visionary, his youthful attractiveness all departed, the relentless propagandist of one idea, perhaps the acrid editor of a monomaniac review."¹

Bailey recognizes the fact the comic element plays a part in the exposure of a number of Beauchamp's highly vulnerable character weaknesses.² Bailey considers him the most interesting male study between Richard Feverel and Sir Willoughby Patterne.³ Although Beauchamp has some very serious weaknesses, Bailey praises the way his character is developed with real strength and farce and very great qualities of personal attraction.⁴

Beach has a comment to make on the comedy of the general situation which consists in the anomalous character and position of the hero in the midst of a typically aristocratic, conventional environment and the strong contrast and conflict between two stubborn wills and points of view--that of Nevil on one side and that of stupid England (typified by Everard Romfrey) on the other.⁵ Beach says the pervading comedy is principally biting satire and sarcasm on obstinate British Toryism.⁶ Beach says the comedy of the relations of Nevil to his uncle, especially

1 Crees, George Meredith. A Study of His Works and Personality, p. 56. Crees believes, too, that Beauchamp is the twin brother of Richard Feverel, an impetuous, self-absorbed youth, but that Nevil is more disciplined, less self-centered, "readier to devote himself to a common cause."

2 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith. A Study, pp. 18-19.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, pp.174,175.

6 Ibid., p. 175.

in the affair of Dr. Shrapnel, places "too intense a strain on one's feelings to be amusing."¹ Of course the proper retort to this particular statement is that Meredith's comedy is not necessarily meant to be amusing, even though it does often succeed in rousing peals of mocking laughter. More often it intends to stimulate only a quiet chuckle or the "thoughtful laughter of the mind" that Meredith refers to in his Essay.

Perhaps the most astonishing piece of adverse criticism comes from the pen of Miss Lynch who is usually too much occupied in disseminating sweetness and light to bear any hostile ill will. But here she is in a positively savage mood and attacks Beauchamp's Career as "Mr. Meredith's one dull book--an exhaustive political treatise almost unreadable except for Romfrey and Renée."² Nevil she dismisses as an "impossible fellow, too wearisomely in earnest, too monotonous in his devotion to one idea."³ And poor, old, harmless, inoffensive Dr. Shrapnel she labels an "unmitigated bore with his everlasting letters."⁴

Although there is indisputable evidence to prove that Beauchamp's Career was one of Meredith's favorite works,⁵ and although there is a

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 173.

2 Lynch, George Meredith. A Study, p. 111.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 113.

5 Butcher, Memories of George Meredith, p. 42. "Later in life he told me Beauchamp's Career was one of his favorite works and Renée was the character of all others he loved best." Cf. also Ellis, His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 241--Meredith said of Renée to Mr. Schwob: "was she not a sweet girl? I think I am a little in love with her yet." This remark was made twenty years after her creation!

surprisingly large proportion of the Comic Spirit in a novel that was professedly an expression of serious political philosophy, nevertheless the undercurrent of comedy remains subordinate and incidental. The main interest of the novel is decidedly not centered in the operations of the Comic Spirit. The comedy of situation is emphasized to an unusual degree, and the passages criticizing the conservative, Tory aspect of English political life are of no small significance in a study of Meredith's use of comedy.

SHORT STORIES - FARINA

Although Meredith's short stories are printed together in one volume of the Boxhill edition of his collected works, they represent a range of almost twenty years. Farina was published in 1857, The House on the Beach in 1877, although it was begun twenty years earlier,¹ The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper in 1877, and The Tale of Chloe in 1879. The earliest one, Farina, as might be expected, contains only slight touches of Meredith's later comic method, in spite of the fact that it is completely farcical in tone. Character does not come in for comic representation with the exception of poor old Aunt Lisbeth who is portrayed as a legitimate object of ridicule because of her vanity and her pose of outraged virginity.² Her amusing warnings against the wickedness of all men are simply that and no more. She makes very little impression on the other characters or the progress of the plot, and is mentioned here only because of the unusual fact that Meredith in his later work very seldom singled out women as victims of the Comic Spirit. Meredith generally employed women as instruments rather than victims of the Comic Spirit.

The chief object of ridicule in Farina is the famous White Rose Club whose members are one and all deluded into the belief that they must uphold at any cost the honor of the fair heroine, Marguarita von

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 37. Cf. Ellis, George Meredith, p. 89-- who says The House was begun in the 60's.

2 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 197. "She took to her bed and allowed the sun to rise without her."

Groschen. Dietrich Schill in particular is the one member most outstanding in his folly. The one scene in which he takes the most exaggerated pains to live up to the letter of the Club agreement, and is laughed at heartily by the quick-witted heroine is the one passage where the comic method really dominates. Marguarita, though ostensibly the conventional damsel in distress, is really a perfect example of a good Meredithian woman--healthy, sensible, alert, vivacious--in short, an attractive heroine not without brains.

The White Rose Club is forgotten during the major excitement of the story, but emerges in the latter part in an unforgettable scene. Too late they hear of the heroine's plight--she has been kidnapped but already rescued. Gallantly they set forth on their quest, and when they discover that the hero has beaten them by a wide margin, they try desperately to summon their chagrinned dignity and stammer feebly that they were "coming to the rescue."¹ Peals of hearty laughter vanquish them, and they depart protesting that "jest is not allowed" in the White Rose Club.²

A minor figure of fun in Farina is the curiously symbolic character of the monk, St. Gregory, who engages in a queerly amusing combat with the Devil on the cloudy heights of Drachenfels.³ The monk apparently is representative of those who "go through life dreaming" and shutting their eyes to worldly reality. It is hardly safe, however,

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 248.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 219.

to discuss this strange episode in connection with Meredith's theory of comedy since it is obviously but not clearly allegorical in intention. Allegory played no part in Meredith's later work.

Probably the hero, Farina, should be mentioned, although he is hardly more than the shadowy knight of chivalry ready for any noble adventure or rescue work. The only passage where his character betrays the common human touch is early in the story when he utters a ridiculous apostrophe and is sharply brought back to sense and reality by the Goshawk who has scant patience with such "moon madness."¹

George Eliot, one of the early reviewers and admirers of Meredith, criticized Farina rather severely as lacking in completeness and somewhat ill-balanced.² Another early reviewer spoke of the piece as a "full-blooded specimen of the nonsense of genius."³

Many of the critics agree with George Eliot that Farina is hardly worthy of serious consideration. Chief among them is Beach who dismisses the story as "full of impertinent smartness" in a style "suggestive of George Bernard Shaw."⁴ Beach considers Farina a "good story of adventure spoiled by frivolous treatment."⁵ He admits there is fun in it, but that on the whole it falls below the notice of the Comic Muse.⁶

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 193.

2 Hammerton, George Meredith, p. 144. Quoted from The Westminster Review, October, 1857.

3 Henderson, George Meredith, pp. 29-30. Quoted from The Athenaeum.

4 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 209.

5 Ibid.

6 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 18.

Priestley, too, characterizes Farina as the "slightest and least admired" of all Meredith's work, even "less successful than the Shaving of Shagpat."¹ It strikes Priestley that the "blend of Gothic terror, farce, and vague allegory is not happy, though there are some good things in the book, notably fine passages of description."²

The most severe criticism comes from G. P. Lathrop who is scornful of Farina because of its "tawdry Germanism" and because it contains too many "echoes of Meredith's Carlylean grandiose manner of manipulating little things."³

Ellis, a recent critic, falls in line with the statement that "ghosts and humor never blend well."⁴

On the other side, it is possible to find a number of critics who are inclined to praise Farina. Gretton comments on the story as a "well-sustained rendering of romantic adventures in a medieval setting."⁵

More discriminating is the comment of Sencourt that Farina is Meredith's first "essay in lending romance to tradesmen."⁶

Jerrold feels that Farina is a story of "real distinction and of considerable interest in any record of its author's literary development"⁷ but fails to go into any details.

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 18.

2 Ibid.

3 Hammerton, George Meredith, p. 200.

4 Ellis, George Meredith, p. 90.

5 Gretton, Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 25.

6 Sencourt, Life of Meredith, p. 57.

7 Jerrold, George Meredith, p. 41.

Bailey detects "occasional glints of the same philosophy emphasized in The Shaving of Shagpat, such as the corrective power of laughter, the inevitable fall that waits on pride and the foolishness of placing the conventional above the absolute."¹ Although he does not elaborate these points, Bailey has made here a much more penetrating critical remark than any of the other commentators.

The most unusual piece of criticism, however, comes from Able, who says that Farina is not only imitative of Peacock's Maid Marian but is also a direct burlesque on Kingsley's Westward Ho and that its satire of false sentimentality is a parody on Kingsley's "chrome-colored picture of Elizabethan England with its ultra-sentimental, romantic core."² This is the most illuminating single piece of criticism to be found.

The weight of evidence points in the direction of unfavorable criticism. Although there are slight foreshadowings of Meredith's later comic theory, as we have seen, they are relatively unimportant and interesting only to the student who is following the lines of the author's literary development.

THE HOUSE ON THE BEACH - A REALISTIC TALE

The House on the Beach appeared in 1877 in the January issue of The New Quarterly just one month before the Essay on Comedy was delivered.

1 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, p. 41.

2 Able, Meredith and Peacock. A Study in Literary Influence, p. 33.

It had been begun, however, long before that period.¹ The chief character, Mart Tinman, has all the ear marks of a perfect snob and is therefore a made-to-order victim of the Comic Spirit. He was originally a small shop-keeper with such high social ambitions that he retires from business at the early age of forty in order to devote his time to official life in his old home town.² Another very lofty ambition is that he "pretends to espousals with a born lady,"³ which immediately betrays the facts, first, that he is ashamed of his own humble origin, and, second, that he aspires to climb in the social scale.

These facts alone would make him ridiculous enough to be a comic hero, but along with these regrettable traits of character, he possesses the weakness for cheap economies that makes him completely vulnerable.⁴

His meanness and stinginess is offset, or perhaps heightened by the fact that he was very much "alive to ridicule" and greatly worried about his lack of popularity.⁵

The plot gets under way and also introduces a second comic character in the person of Van Dieman Smith, an old school friend of Mart

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 37--says it was begun in the 50's. Ellis, George Meredith, p. 87--says it was begun in the 60's. Gretton, Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 141--says it belongs to same period as the Essay.

2 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 70--He is described as a "high-stepping bailiff."

3 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 71.

4 Ibid., pp. 73-77. He likes to do his own marketing to save expense and is fond of boasting how little he pays for wine. His hospitality is very scanty, and his occasional guests either suffer in silence or spread "black reports."

5 Ibid., p. 72.

Tinman, who arrives from Australia for a visit. Although Van Dieman Smith is only a secondary comic character, he is presented carefully and cleverly with a touch of real Meredithian comedy when he announces himself with a "certain pomposity" and delivers his card as though it were the "flourish of a trumpet before a great man."¹ Very little psychological reason is given for his pompous attitude other than the fact that he, too, is a prosperous retired business man and excessively given to boasting about his adopted land of Australia.² As the story develops, the constant succession of quarrels between Tinman and Smith are amusing because of their very bitterness and because neither man realizes that he is being entirely petty and ridiculous.³

The first episode in the relationship between the two men is rich in comic possibilities. The accidental breaking of a cheval glass in the carpenter's shop reveals Tinman's reason for having hired it; he wants to pose before it in his Court suit and practise the speech he hopes to make when he is actually presented to her Majesty.⁴ Smith is not only shocked to find his old friend is "making a donkey of himself,"⁵ but discovers himself on the brink of the first of their prolonged quarrels in which neither one is willing to pay for his share in the

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 78.

2 Ibid., p. 92. Incident of the dinner party at which both Tinman and Smith "bragged until they were nearly at fisticuffs."

3 Ibid., p. 78. Throughout the entire story beginning with Chapter II.

4 Ibid., pp. 82-84.

5 Ibid.

smashing of the mirror. Here we come on an interesting part played by Tinman's fellow townsmen who act as Greek Chorus in their comment on the situation. They are acute enough to realize that the scene affords "laughing-stuff for a year if they take it in small doses."¹

An incidental illustration of Tinman's comic trait of thrift carried to the vice of stinginess is the incident in which he hesitates to extend hospitality to his former friend, fearing that he may want to borrow money.² He finally decides to invite him and his daughter also to dinner, feeling very righteous and heroic, and comforting himself with the "electrical idea" that he can offer his guests "sherry at fifteen shillings" instead of "ceremonial wine at twenty-five."³ A somewhat similar incident occurs later when Tinman, having been refused by all the great ladies of his acquaintance, makes up his mind for purely practical reasons to marry his old friend's daughter. As he grows to know her, his interest increases from respect to admiration because she "looked sincere and she dressed inexpensively."⁴

The two young people in the story, Annette Smith and Herbert Fellingham, the newspaper reporter, just barely avoid by a hair's breadth being comic characters. Annette comes nearer to it in that she tries

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 82. The leaders are Mr. and Mrs. Crickledon, carpenter and cook, both "sharp gossips" (p. 136). Mrs. Crickledon remembers Tinman's mother had the same weakness for economy and pride, and "pomp's inherited."

2 Ibid., p. 88.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 143.

to deceive herself and her father into pretending that she will be a willing sacrifice to Mart Tinman's proposal of marriage.¹ She is not actively ridiculed, but it is gently hinted that she is altogether blind to her own advantage and much too serious and conventional in her outlook.² She is saved from tragedy, however, by the comic denouement, by the efforts of her lover, and by her own common sense.³

Fellingham represents the mouthpiece of the author and is really the instrument of the Comic Spirit. His contempt for both his elders is clearly justified, although Meredith suggests that perhaps it is a trifle youthful of him to be too satirical.⁴ He is not particularly subtle, and is rebuked by Annette more than once for making fun of Tinman, but he pleads with some eloquence that he cannot help it since Tinman is "a perfect burlesque as distinctly made to be laughed at as a mask in a pantomime."⁵

Curiously enough, the preponderance of critical opinion is decidedly against the success of The House on the Beach. Priestley, usually a very discerning critic, dismisses the story summarily as a "somewhat crude farcical affair."⁶ Bailey recognizes that it represents

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 100.

2 Ibid., p. 100.

3 Ibid., p. 154. "Annette laughed, and her mind was cleared by that beneficent exercise." Another good example of the power of laughter to dispel the mists of illusion and restore sanity.

4 Ibid., p. 136.

5 Ibid., p. 91.

6 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 37.

Meredith's earlier manner but allows no credit whatever for any mark of maturity.¹ He seems to take special pleasure in citing a quotation to the effect that The House on the Beach is "Meredith in his bones."²

Even Beach, though he professes a fondness for this "curious tale" insists that there is no real "stress laid on comic traits."³ Undoubtedly he is correct in stating that the "general effect is that of water color as compared with oils,"⁴ but it is hard to see how he can overlook the cleverly comic delineation of character that marks almost a complete maturity of manner. He criticizes Mart Tinman as a sort of Dickens character but not treated in the Dickens' vein, and he complains of a "lack of explosive laughter."⁵ True enough, but why criticize Meredith for not being Dickens, and why demand "explosive laughter" when that never was Meredith's aim as part of his comic method. As a matter of fact, it would seem that there actually is more "explosive laughter" in this story than is really consistent with the Meredithian scheme of comedy which calls for serious exposure of weakness of character with laughter thereat distinctly subordinate.

Sir James Matthew Barrie considers the story the "least important" of the collection, but he does bestow considerable praise upon the closing scene which "haunts" his memory for the contrast between the

1 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, p. 130. Quoted from G.S. Street in The Yellow Book, April, 1895.

2 Ibid.

3 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 208.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

costume and wearer's condition.¹ And he makes an illuminating comparison between the pretensions of Mart Tinman and "Old Mel" in Evan Harrington.²

The critics who praise The House on the Beach are very much in the minority. Ellis enjoys the story as an entertaining piece of work and comments particularly on the character of Tinman as an "early study in egoism, a subject later to be developed so consummately."³ He singles out for special praise the scenes in which Tinman rehearses his Court procedure.⁴

Jerrold finds The House on the Beach "full of the spirit of true comedy," and the mean, ambitious Tinman, a "rich creation of satiric humor."⁵ A similar comment is that of Sencourt who thinks Meredith's exposure of social ambition is well handled and his ideas on snobbery well brought out.⁶ Gretton's critical praise is for the method in which Meredith "plays with the mean-minded ex-tradesman as a cat plays with a mouse,"⁷ and for the way Tinman's falseness is "exposed pitilessly and mercilessly."⁸

1 Quoted in Hamerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 219.

2 Ibid., p. 219.

3 Ellis, George Meredith, p. 87.

4 Ibid.

5 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Toward Appreciation, p. 133.

6 Sencourt, The Life of George Meredith, p. 146.

7 Gretton, Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 141.

8 Ibid., p. 144.

Although there are very few critics who consider The House on the Beach worthy of serious consideration, it would seem from the close analysis made above that work really represents Meredith if not at his best, then certainly at a very high level of artistic achievement. His theories of comedy are consistently illustrated and his choice of subject matter is a direct outgrowth of his stipulations in The Essay. We have seen that he kept the material in mind over a period of from fifteen to twenty years, and the fact that it was published during the same year as the Essay points to a close connection between theory and practice.

THE CASE OF GENERAL OPLE AND LADY CAMPER

There seems to be no weight of evidence to show that Meredith did any work on the story of The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper before the time of its publication in the summer issue (1877) of the New Quarterly Magazine. According to Priestley, however, the plot of the tale was based on a real event, an action taken by a General Hopkins against a next-door neighbor, Lady Eleanor Cathcart, and was a reminiscence of Meredith's Kingston days.¹ The story is a brief one but delightfully complete, and the comedy element is handled to perfection. It is, for Meredith, an unusually light-hearted story told with a warmth and sympathy that are not generally evident in his pitiless psychological

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 37. Meredith lived at Kingston Lodge for a short time after his second marriage in 1864. Cf. Ellis, George Meredith, p. 149--the Merediths lived at Kingston until 1867.

exposure of comic weaknesses of character.

To be sure, the hero, General Ople, has his imperfections; otherwise there would be no room for comedy. But he is a distinctly friendly and even lovable character, a retired soldier and widower who enjoys people and is genuinely fond of his daughter, but who has also the admirable trait of knowing how to mind his own business and keep out of trouble. If this were all, his simplicity might endear him to the reader but would scarcely provide material for the Comic Spirit to work on.

The General's character is complicated by an inexplicable streak of pomposity, of inordinate vanity (he fancies himself as something of a conqueror among the fair sex), and of complete blindness to anything that lies outside his main line of vision.¹ Here it is that the comic element enters in for a full share of the spoils, and the General is made to squirm and writhe uncomfortably under the lashings of the whip of comedy, wielded very capably in the hands of the clear-eyed Lady Camper.

At the beginning of the story, the General is a "modest, contented soul"² but with the appearance in the neighborhood of Lady Camper, he is jolted out of his complacency and gradually brought into a relationship with her that destroys his peace of mind and makes him completely

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 267. He is described as "no great pretender"--does not belong in the ranks of those who are "logically displaced from the heights they have been raised to."

2 Ibid., p. 218.

miserable.¹ She is such an attractive woman that it is not difficult to understand why the General loses his heart to her, in spite of the mysterious uncertainty about her age. He does not know what to believe when she declares with a great air of frankness that she is not a day less than seventy.² One of the best touches of comedy occurs when we are told that his admiration for his new neighbor is greatly stimulated because she was the daughter of an earl, and the general is not only "humbly respectful" toward wealth but also toward the aristocracy.³

It is after the General finds himself entangled in a definite proposal of marriage that the comedy begins to get under way. He discovers to his great confusion that Lady Camper is no respecter of his dignity and seems to delight in making a fool of him.⁴ He is particularly sensitive on that point and has always exercised the most extreme caution to "avoid the quagmire of the ridiculous."⁵ And here he is-- wallowing in it. Lady Camper makes fun of his stilted expressions, orders him never to indulge in them in her hearing, until he feels like a "man haunted, defenceless, open to exposure in his little whims, foibles, tricks, incompetencies, in what lay in his heart, and the words that

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 271. Lady Camper calls on the General while he is digging in his cabbages. He is so ashamed of being found among the cabbages rather than the roses that he "squandered his dizzy wits in profuse apologies."

2 Ibid., p. 282.

3 Ibid., pp. 262, 267.

4 Ibid., p. 289. He is "horribly scourged under the mild assurance of her dictatorship."

5 Ibid., p. 269.

would come to his tongue."¹

The truth is that Lady Camper's persecutions are all motivated by the desire to open the General's eyes and to bring him to a realization that his daughter's happiness is at stake. Poor General Ople is so wrapped up in his own sentimentality that he is completely though not willfully blind to the love affair of the young people. Lady Camper is anxious to promote their cause and tries desperately to "drag him from thinking of himself and his own affair."²

Fortunately she succeeds in "weeding out"³ his faults, because she has good material to work on. He is "brave and generous and blinded more by hoodwinking than real egotism."⁴ She recognizes, too, that his egotism is not too extreme and that a "certain amount" is necessary "to be a man."⁵ So she relents, forgives him, (though it would almost seem he has more to forgive, but his admiration for her has persisted in spite of all her persecution) and the ending is the conventionally so-called happy one with the author commenting that the reason for the union of the "simple man and the complex woman is that he is a fund of amusement for her humour."⁶

The general trend of criticism toward the Case of General Ople

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 296.

2 Ibid., p. 301.

3 Ibid., p. 311.

4 Ibid., p. 285.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 315.

and Lady Camper is that the story is pleasant and entertaining though not significant in any way. Priestley says nothing more of it than that it is a "little farcical story."¹ Hammerton quotes an opinion of Barrie to the effect that it "leaves a vivid impression of an acted play though probably not a comedy with sufficient guffaw in it to command success."²

Beach characterizes the tale as the "most laughable" of Meredith's short stories containing scenes of misunderstanding worthy of Moliere.³ He goes on to say that the General is the funniest of all Meredith's snobs principally because he is no "hopeless victim"⁴ but has the great good luck to encounter a lady of sense who takes the trouble to shake the nonsense out of him. Beach, like Meredith, forgives the General for his "superficial genteel affectations"⁵ because he is sound and solid underneath his exterior weaknesses.

Bailey calls the story a "skit in Meredith's very lightest style."⁶ He also analyzes in some detail the character of Lady Camper which he considers a fore study of Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson in The Egoist.⁷

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 37.

2 Hammerton, George Meredith, p. 218, from The Scots Observer, November 24, 1888.

3 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, p. 208.

4 Ibid., p. 58.

5 Ibid.

6 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, p. 131. Cf. p.129--Bailey quotes G. S. Street from The Yellow Book, April, 1895--"General Ople is Meredith alive but imperfect." Bailey disagrees.

7 Ibid.

Henderson's praise of the story as the "flower of Meredith's humor" seems exaggerated, but undoubtedly he is correct in stating that it gives the "main tenets of its author's philosophy in miniature."¹ If Henderson's praise is exaggerated, Dick's is wildly extravagant. He raises the story to the level of the "lustigste, lieblichste von Meredith's Komödien"² and thinks that in the character of General Ople we recognize ourselves and if not ourselves, than our favorite acquaintances.³ He is more restrained in his discussion of Lady Camper as an embodiment of the Comic Spirit, but flies off into the clouds again with the notion that the story is "unter Meredith's werken die Komödie von allen und unter den Englischen Lustspielen und den kontinentalen seit Shakespeare und Moliere wenn nicht des bedeutendste so doch das witzigste, heiterste, originellste."⁴

A somewhat more moderate critical position would probably be safer in attempting a final evaluation of the story. Certainly it illustrates Meredith's theories of comedy to perfection, particularly in the part played by Lady Camper. She is the perfect instrument of the Comic Spirit whose chief function is to expose the weaknesses of the comic victim. But the hero is not a good example of a real Meredithian egoist. We can laugh at him as much as we like. But we cannot despise him utterly. He is too frank and honest and generous for that. Perhaps for once Meredith

1 Henderson, George Meredith, p. 301.

2 Dick, George Meredith, p. 63.

3 Ibid., p. 72.

4 Ibid.

let his heart rule his head and presented a character whose virtues overbalanced his vices. In any case, the comic element is admirably handled.

THE TALE OF CHLOE. AN EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF BEAU BEAMISH

The Tale of Chloe was published in The New Quarterly Magazine in 1879. Although it is predominantly tragic, there are sufficient elements of comedy in it to justify its classification under the heading of tragi-comedy. The early part of the story is almost entirely comedy of a very brittle variety thoroughly typical of and consistent with its eighteenth century setting. The comedy centers about the "transformed dairymaid"¹ who as the "Duchess of Dewlap"² is the butt of ridicule and mockery.

Beau Beamish, himself very "susceptible to ridicule,"³ declares open war on "pretense, vulgarity, and snobbery" especially if found in "persons of quality."⁴ If denied in that direction, he contents himself by making fun of pretense wherever he finds it, and no better object can be discovered than the silly little "Buttercup Duchess"⁵ who loves to talk about her rise in fortune and her grand position, hoping to impress everyone with the importance of her social career.

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 25.

2 Ibid., p. 21

3 Ibid., p. 65.

4 Ibid., p. 24.

5 Ibid., p. 15.

The fact that she is, at the same time, extremely conscious of her humble origin, and very sensitive to ridicule, makes her an ideal target for the shafts of the Beau's wit. The best comic scene is the mock ceremony carefully arranged for the Duchess' reception when she enters the Wells.¹ The poor lady vaguely realizes that she is being made fun of and protests haughtily that she will not be laughed at.²

In the early part of the story, Chloe, whose "sprightly wit is so famous as to be considered medical"³ joins in the laughter at the Duchess' expense, but as the story progresses, she resolves on heroic measures for saving Susan from the consequences of her folly. After that there is no more room for comedy, and at the tragic end even the effervescent Beau finds himself "capable of no more than mere stammering."⁴

The Tale of Chloe is generally considered Meredith's finest short story, but because of its overwhelming tragic atmosphere has escaped critical analysis from the point of view of its comic element. One critic says specifically that it is "completely removed from the element of comedy."⁵ Very few of the critics will even admit the possibility of any comedy.

Beach, however, in a very penetrating passage, comments on the

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 21.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 11.

4 Ibid., p. 66.

5 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, p. 132.

spirit of comedy which "follows with inexorable inquisition"¹ all the characters with the exception of Chloe. He appreciates the rare blend of dramatic irony and poetic comedy that prevails until the tragedy overshadows all else.

It is true that the presence of tragedy tends to make the critic overlook the fact that comedy is delightfully prevalent in the opening scenes of the story. If Meredith had labeled his title somewhat after the fashion of The Tragic Comedians, it would not be so easy to miss its significance. The Beau as the instrument of the Comic Spirit and the Duchess as the recipient of the comic mockery are both very good examples of Meredith's theory of comedy.

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in Meredith, p. 179.

THE EGOIST

The Egoist was the first novel to follow Meredith's Essay on Comedy, and, as we shall see, is the most perfect example of the theories expressed therein. It was published in 1879, and appeared serially in the Glasgow Weekly Herald, June 21, 1879--January 10, 1880 under the title, Sir Willoughby Patterne, The Egoist.¹ The novel enjoyed a great success and a second edition came out within a year.² A popular American edition was put out in 1879 by the firm of Harpers.³

A letter written by Meredith on April 16, 1879 to Robert Louis Stevenson contains the following comment on The Egoist:--

I don't think you will like it; I doubt if those who care for my work will take to it at all.....after doing my best with it, I am in no hurry to see it appear. It is a Comedy, with only half of me in it, unlikely therefore to take either the public or my friends.....I am about one quarter through The Amazing Marriage, which I promise you, you shall like better.⁴

Ironically enough, the novel above all others widened and strengthened Meredith's reputation, and the correspondent who "will not like it" was one of the foremost persons instrumental in spreading the fame of the book and its author.

Later, in 1906, in a letter written to Dr. H. Anders on November 9, Meredith revises his previous estimate of The Egoist as follows:

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 93.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. I, p. 297.

I have not made any estimate of the value of my books in prose. I see many faults in all of them, and though I have not striven for perfection, as that would have cramped my hand in writing, something nearer to it would have pleased me. The Egoist comes nearer than the other books to the proper degree of roundness and finish.¹

There is no doubt whatever that the novel possesses a unity and wholeness² that Meredith seldom achieved in his prose fiction. But what interests us most here in our present study is that it is the most perfect illustration of Meredith's theories of comedy to be found anywhere in the entire range of his novels. There is no swerving from the purpose which Meredith has clearly in mind at all moments during the course of the action: namely, to play the light of the Comic Spirit on every movement of the chief actor. Squirm as he may, Sir Willoughby is never permitted to appear as anything other than a pure victim of Comedy. Indeed his squirmings and wriggings add appreciably to the comic values of the piece. Although some of his activities almost seem faintly tragic, or at any rate, pathetic, we are not allowed to feel even one pang of sympathy for the persecuted wretch. He richly deserves his fate, however hard it may be, and we cannot feel guilty for

1 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II, p. 589.

2 The dramatic quality of the novel is very evident and one cannot help wondering why some enterprising producer has not adapted it for stage use. Probably there would be considerable difficulty, however, to secure the services of an actor willing to undertake the unsympathetic title role. Perhaps Lawrence Olivier, after his brilliant success in Rebecca might be induced to attempt it.

not restraining a quiet chuckle over the laughableness of the ridiculous situation which he has brought upon himself.

The opening section of the novel, called "The Prelude," consists of a declaration of the principles of comedy echoing sentiments expressed in the famous Essay. The necessity of having a civilized society of men and women on a footing of intellectual equality as a setting for comedy is stressed.¹ And the Comic Spirit is redefined as the expression of "our united social intelligence" which "proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us."² Meredith refers again to the "laughter of reason" and the therapeutic value of comedy which he says is "the ultimate civilizer, the polisher, the sweet cook."³ He repeats the doctrine that comedy "watches over sentimentalism with a brick-rod,"⁴ but is not therefore opposed to honest, healthy romance.

And in a most illuminating passage, he declares that comedy does not necessarily militate against pathos. He admits that the Egoist "surely inspires pity," but he insists that he is "not allowed to rush at you, roll you over and squeeze your body for the briny drops. There is the innovation."⁵ Finally Meredith makes a significant reference to his employment of the "very penetrative, very wicked imps"⁶ as a sort of comic chorus. He says:--

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 1--the added point is made that there must be "no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes."

2 Ibid., p. 3.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

4 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 4. Comedy is also compared to the "delicate spirit....Ariel released by Prospero's wand from the fetters of the damned witch Sycorax."

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

Imps have their freakish wickedness in them to kindle detective vision: malignly do they love to uncover ridiculousness in imposing figures. Wherever they catch sight of Egoism they pitch their camps, they circle and squat, and forthwith they trim their lanterns, confident of the ludicrous to come.....They will, it is known of them, dog a great House for centuries, and be at the birth of all the new heirs in succession, diligently taking confirmatory notes, to join hands and chime their chorus in one of their merry rings round the tottering pillar of the House, when his turn arrives; as if they had (possibly they had) smelt of old date a doomed colossus of Egoism in that unborn, inconceived inheritor of the stuff of the family. They dare not be chuckling while Egoism is valiant, while sober, while socially valuable, nationally serviceable. They wait."¹

Sir Willoughby exhibits himself in his true colors as a sentimental, snobbish egoist in the very first episode of the story. Patronizingly he sends a cheque to a poor relation, Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne, in condescending recognition of some heroism or other performed by the fellow in China.² Sir Willoughby grows "quite fond of talking of his 'military namesake and distant cousin, young Patterne, the Marine!'"³ He is rather surprised that the cousin contents himself with a letter of thanks without "availing himself of the invitation to partake of the hospitalities of Patterne Hall."⁴

Sometime later Willoughby is thoroughly disconcerted to receive a call from Lieutenant Patterne who appears by surprise and turns out

1 Meredith, The Egoist, pp. 4-5.

2 Ibid., p. 6.

3 Ibid., p. 7.

4 Ibid.

to be a "thick-set stumpy man.....decidedly not bearing the stamp of the gentleman."¹ Fortunately Willoughby has caught sight of the creature from a distance as he approaches Patterne Hall, and thus is able to avoid an embarrassing encounter with a socially unacceptable inferior by the simple expediency of having his footman report that he is "not at home."²

This opening episode marks the beginning of Sir Willoughby's comic career. Indirectly it leads to the eventual breaking up of his first engagement, for his fiancée, Constantia Durham is so embarrassed and alarmed by this display of snobbishness that her eyes are suddenly and instantly opened to the faults that she had hitherto ignored.³ Moreover, from this precise moment the "ring of imps" that are constantly "in attendance on Sir Willoughby" gather round and "maintain their station with strict observation of his movements at all hours."⁴

Jilted within ten days of the wedding by Constantia who elopes with a Captain Oxford, Willoughby becomes exceedingly attentive to Laetitia Dale, a "portionless girl of no position,"⁵ who lives humbly

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 8.

2 Ibid., p. 8. Sir Willoughby's "acute instinct advised him swiftly of the absurdity of introducing to his friends a heavy unrepresentable senior as the celebrated gallant Lieutenant of the Marines, and the same as a member of his family." The considerate dismissal was "performed by a gentleman supremely advanced at a very early age in the art of cutting."

3 Ibid., p. 9.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 22

enough with her father, a "battered army surgeon from India,"¹ in one of Willoughby's cottages. Willoughby has always considered her a "paragon of cleverness"² and has never minded in the least being the object of her obvious and excessive admiration. He is now glad enough of an opportunity to fall back on her comforting regard for him, and luckily for him, with his extreme sensitiveness to ridicule, the fashionable world of society is charitably reticent about the whole business.³

After a decent interval of several months of "homely courtship,"⁴ Willoughby departs for a tour of the globe, and during his three-year absence writes very ironical letters home about "our democratic cousins in the U. S. A.,"⁵ where, aside from one or two instances of insolence on the part of his hosts, which he cites, he manages to "escape pretty comfortably. The President had been, consciously or not, uncivil, but no one knew his origin!"⁶

Learning nothing from his first unfortunate love affair which had left him high and dry, a figure pitilessly exposed to public ridicule, as he very well knew, though he tried desperately to hide the

1 Meredith, The Egoist, pp. 15-17.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 22. Constantia is universally derided as "that mad thing."

4 Ibid., p. 22.

5 Ibid., p. 23.

6 Ibid., p. 24.

bitter truth from himself. Sir Willoughby is soon embarked on a second affair. He becomes involved in an engagement to Clara Middleton, who has all the satisfactory requirements of beauty, health, and money. The comic aspect of the situation is intensified by Willoughby's perplexed attitude toward Laetitia Dale, whom he has not the slightest intention of marrying, but at the same time he craves assurance of her faithfulness to him.¹ He dwells much on the value of platonic friendship, much to poor Laetitia's intense discomfort.² He cannot help feeling that "Clara did not study and know him like Laetitia," and as a result the unhappy Laetitia is left to think it "pleased him to play at cat and mouse" with her.³ Even though he is totally unaware of it, Sir Willoughby is a glaring example of a comic character, in his sentimental wish to have his cake and eat it, too.

Equally comic is his justification of his choice of Clara Middleton as his future bride. He confides to Mr. Mountstuart Jenkinson that the "survival of the Patternes" is to be assured.⁴ Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, who is keenly critical of Willoughby's imperfections, is much amused by his proud boasts.⁵

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 32--He is described here as a man who lives "backwards almost as intensely as in the present"--a sure mark of the sentimentalist who lacks a firm grip on reality.

2 Ibid., p. 33.

3 Ibid., p. 35.

4 Ibid., p. 38.

5 Ibid., p. 38--She is very attentive, listening to the "best man of a host blow his triumphant horn, and loudly."

With a delicate art he conveyed to the lady's understanding that Miss Middleton had been snatched from a crowd, without a breath of the crowd having offended his niceness. He did it through sarcasm at your modern young women, who run about the world nibbling and nibbled at, until they know one sex as well as the other, and are not a whit less cognizant of the market than men; pure, possibly; it is not easy to say innocent; decidedly not an feminine ideal. Miss Middleton was different; she was the true ideal, fresh-gathered morning fruit in a basket, warranted by her bloom."¹

Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's part is that of the woman who acts as instrument of the Comic Spirit. She understands quite well the sentimental, comic implications of Sir Willoughby's "sensual stipulation for perfect bloom, silver purity, which is redolent of the Oriental origin of the love-passion."² But she contents herself here simply by congratulating Sir Willoughby on the "prize he had won in the fair western-eastern."³ And such is her restraint that Sir Willoughby never suspects he is furnishing entertainment as a comic spectacle.

As the plot progresses, Willoughby gradually comes to have doubts of the perfection of his Clara, when he is obliged to make the unpleasant discovery that the young lady actually has a mind of her own and does not hesitate to use it. Sometimes she goes so far as to dare to differ from him in opinion, which wounds him seriously, for he wants her to be "simply material in his hands for him to mould."⁴ He tries to show her the error

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 38-39.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 44.

of her ways, but she displays a surprising obstinacy in clinging to her own ideas. When he lectures her on the "theme of infinity of love" and his favorite sentimental doctrine of the world well lost for love, she "listens gravely, conceiving the infinity as a narrow dwelling, where a voice droned and ceased not. However, she listened. She became an attentive listener."¹

Although Clara is not yet in a position to appreciate to its fullest extent the comic side of Willoughby's character, she is beginning to look upon him with a coldly critical eye. Suddenly it occurs to her that she is "beset by a circle of imps, hardly responsible for her thoughts."² She can see only too well the narrow-minded vices of smug complacency and selfishness in the man she has promised to marry. So far, Clara is only a passive instrument of the Comic Spirit; her power is yet to be felt.

The engagement very soon becomes so acutely intolerable to Clara, that she summons the necessary courage to make her first open request for release. Willoughby's reaction is pitiably comic.³ He is so completely stunned he can think of nothing to say, is unable to believe she fails to love him, and clings to the comforting thought that she has

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 44.

2 Ibid., p. 47.

3 Ibid., p. 148--For once in his life, his poise and dignity are so thoroughly dissipated that he has "nothing but clownish tumult within."

promised to marry him and that therefore they are indissolubly united.¹

But the worst is yet to come. Willoughby has invited to Patterne Hall to share in the pre-nuptial festivities an old friend of his, Horace de Craye, an attractive, clever Irishman, full of "simple vanity."² Colonel de Craye senses that there is trouble in the air, and is vain enough to believe that he himself has made a conquest of Clara.³ Not only is Horace de Craye a deluded, comic dupe of his own ridiculous vanity, but Willoughby also falls into the same pitfall, imagines that Horace is a conqueror, and is immediately tortured by the "insensate force of jealousy."⁴ Here the comedy, hitherto restrained by the bounds of polite society, exceeds its civilized limits, and stark realism sets in with a strong note of melodrama to tone it up.

The fieriest trial of our egoism, worked in the Egoist to produce division of himself from himself, a concentration of his thoughts upon another object, still himself, but in another breast.....Jealousy invaded him.⁵

Willoughby's agony reaches such dimensions that we might almost find it in our hearts to be sorry for him, were it not for the fact that he is so obviously the cause of his own wretchedness. Meredith never lets

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 149--He reflects that "there is no possibility of releasing a wife" and forthwith (p. 161) seeks solice for his "shrunk self-esteem" by communing with Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson who represents to him "the world he feared and tried to keep sunny for himself by all the arts he could exercise."

2 Ibid., p. 219.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., pp. 230-231.

5 Ibid.

us forget that overwhelming pathos has no part in his comedy, and that real tragedy likewise is barred from its portals.

Willoughby is much more ridiculous than pathetic especially when he makes a deliberate attempt to achieve pathos.¹ Even Laetitia Dale, who by this time has acquired a proper perspective and is able to see Sir Willoughby for what he really is--a pretender and a sentimentalist--does not try to deceive herself any longer.² His plea for sympathy falls on deaf ears, while the Comic Spirit hovers overhead.³

His attendant imps were well-satisfied, likewise, and danced a round about his bed after the vigilant gentleman had ceased to debate on the question of his unveiling of himself past forgiveness of her to Laetitia, and had surrendered unto benignant sleep the present direction of his affairs.⁴

Once more Sir Willoughby has to suffer the full light of the Comic Spirit upon him when, driven to desperation, sure that Clara is in love with de Craye, he tries to make up his mind to take Laetitia for his own and cast off Clara.⁵ He persuades himself that it would be an act of magnanimous generosity on his part to let Clara go, and at the same time he would be doing himself a good turn to marry Laetitia, even if she is a faded spinster of thirty.⁶

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 321.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 324.

5 Ibid., p. 389.

6 Ibid., p. 139--Sir Willoughby is "surprised and pained" when Laetitia admits her age without a quiver, but manages to recover his sang-froid sufficiently to remark that "genius is unacquainted with wrinkles."

His home would be a fortress, impregnable to tongues. He would have divine security in his home.

One who read and knew and worshipped him would be sitting there starlike: sitting there, awaiting him, his fixed star.

It would be marriage with a mirror, with an echo; marriage with a shining mirror, a choric echo.

It would be marriage with an intellect, with a fine understanding; to make his home a fountain of repeatable wit: to make his dear old Patterne Hall the luminary of the country.

.....

His retinue of imps had a revel. We hear wonders of men, and we see a lifting up of hands in the world. The wonders would be explained, and never a hand need to interject, if the mystifying man were but accompanied and reported of by that monkey-eyed confraternaty. They spy the heart and its twists.¹

Willoughby's final fate is one that he richly deserves. He succeeds in getting a wife but at what a dreadful cost to his dignity and self-possession. He is even reduced to the awful necessity of having to beg humbly on bended knees for the privilege of winning her hand.² For Sir Willoughby that unaccustomed humility constitutes a terrific ordeal. Laetitia now can enact the role of Nemesis, and with the "accurate sight and knowledge of him"³ that she now possesses, is able to bring him to terms. She no longer worships him blindly. She now has a "hard detective eye" and can realize fully all his faults, though she does understand, however, that there is "some excuse for a gentleman nurtured in idolatry."⁴

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 389.

2 Ibid., p. 512.

3 Ibid., p. 514.

4 Ibid., p. 517.

The Comic Spirit, acting through Laetitia, exacts full poetic justice from Sir Willoughby, and the "comic Muse compresses her lips" when she contemplates his "change of brides" and the preparations for his coming marriage festivities.¹

For the last time, Sir Willoughby's attendant imps get to work on him and make him horribly uncomfortable when he has to admit that the whole world is laughing at him.² His worst punishment is to "marry a lady with brains"³ who can read him like a book and who will never permit him to indulge his inflated ego in her presence. It is a subject for quiet mirth to reflect upon their future relationship together and to wonder whether Laetitia, like Lady Camper, will succeed in creating a General Ople out of Sir Willoughby Patterne.

There has been remarkably little dissension of opinion among the critics concerning the preeminence of The Egoist. With great unanimity they all agree that it is one of the outstanding and significant achievements of its author. Even the contemporary criticisms express a complete appreciation of its importance, and for once Meredith could not complain that his work was neglected or abused. William Ernest

1 Meredith, The Egoist, p. 523.

2 Ibid., p. 511--The imps have their place and service.....restlessly plucking at the garments which cover our nakedness, nor ever ceasing to twitch them and strain at them until they have fairly stripped us for one of their horrible walpurgio nights."

3 Ibid., p. 519.

Henley, writing in The Academy, November 22, 1879, calls it a "unique piece of literature" and praises it highly as one of the "ablest books of modern years.....full of passion and insight, wit and force, truth and eloquence.....with the perfect breeding of high comedy."¹

James Thomson, reviewing The Egoist in Cope's Tobacco Plant, January, 1880, declares it nothing short of a masterpiece.² Sir Willoughby he describes as one of the "most thoroughly studied and exhibited types in the whole range of literature. . . .we get him by heart from his lordly magnificence and despotic bountifulness as the idol of his little world to his most abject crouching and slinking through sloughs of falsehood in evasion of the scorn or mockery of that very world he detests and despises."³

Among the most enthusiastic of recent critics is S. M. Ellis considers The Egoist the "most brilliant of all Meredith's novels" notable for its "prodigal outpouring of wit, epigram, and comedy."⁴ Although he dislikes its "cold, glittering artificiality and intellectual and philosophical preciosity," he still clings to the belief that it is a "towering alpine peak in literature."⁵ Strangely enough,

1 Forman, George Meredith, Some Early Appreciations, p. 193.

2 Ibid., p. 200.

3 Ibid.

4 Ellis, George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 255.

5 Ibid., p. 257.

however, Ellis fails to recognize the presence of comedy, for he says:--

I see nothing comic in Willoughby, this unhappy man without a true friend, except his stilted phraseology, which is where he fails to resemble universality, and in the ridiculous, final imbroglio, which is simply farcical and unworthy of Meredith. Willoughby's loss of dignity and decency in his desperate attempt to marry Laetitia is in complete contradiction to his proud, sensitive nature. In real life a good-looking, generous baronet with fifty thousand pounds a year would not have to implore a faded spinster in marriage.¹

Ellis objects, too, to the conclusion of the novel which he thinks should end with Willoughby's loss of Clara.² It would be more artistic, he suggests, to leave Willoughby alone with the "dead sea fruit of his reflections" and not try to force the impossible situation of an unsuitable union with Laetitia.³

Other critics have devoted more attention to the aspects of comedy in The Egoist, principally Joseph Warren Beach, who gives us an exhaustive analysis of the main springs of egoism as illustrated in the character of Sir Willoughby. Beach maintains that in itself egoism is not necessarily comic unless "accompanied by ludicrous self-conceit unaware of the discrepancy between one's actual value and the valuation assumed by oneself."⁴ Sir Willoughby fits perfectly into this category and is doubly comic because he is a sentimental egoist who prides himself

1 Ellis, George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 259.

2 Ibid., p. 260.

3 Ibid.

4 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 124.

on the possession of especially rare and intense feelings and chooses to ignore unpleasant facts.¹ Beach makes the point that the character of Sir Willoughby provides a striking contrast between the primitive man he is and the social being he would appear.² As far as Beach is concerned, Sir Willoughby is nothing but ridiculous and despicable in his foolish and futile attempts to save his dignity at the end.³

Bailey points out briefly that the comedy of The Egoist is not hilarious or explosive, but grim and thoughtful, and that Meredith's intention is not to provoke empty laughter but that thoughtful, quiet laughter of the mind which he refers to in the Essay.⁴

One of the very few adverse criticisms is that of M. S. Gretton who feels that The Egoist is too limited in scope and too narrow to be Meredith's greatest novel.⁵ Gretton does admit, however, that Sir Willoughby is a wonderful example of the Comic Spirit's prey.⁶

It is not easy to find fault with The Egoist either from the point of view of plot structure⁷ or characterization, and certainly one

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 128.

2 Ibid., p. 141.

3 Ibid.

4 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith. A Study, p. 136.

5 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 134.

6 Ibid., p. 132.

7 The plot itself is of unusual simplicity for a Meredith novel, but is developed with notable dramatic economy. It might well be the model for Pinero or Henry Arthur Jones or Noel Coward in our own day.

cannot pick flaws in the handling of the comedy element, because that is absolute perfection. Nowhere is it possible to find so flawless an interpretation of the essentially comic vice of egoism. Meredith outdoes himself in presenting a devastating portrait of a ridiculous individual who is representative of a general type. Meredith here achieves with splendid success what Samuel Johnson was pleased to call in his hearty neo-classical way, "the grandeur of generality,"¹ at the same time preserves all the recognizable features of a distinct individual. It is undoubtedly Meredith's finest triumph.

1 Johnson, Lives of the English Poets in The Great Critics edited by Smith and Parks, p. 461.

THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS

It is an interesting and worthwhile study to see how exactly Meredith carried out his ideas in The Tragic Comedians, which appeared in 1880, three years after the formulation of his theories of comedy in his famous Essay. In the first place, the chief characters are suitable subjects for comic treatment. They belong to an enlightened, intellectual society. Clotilde, the heroine, moves in a diplomatic circle which feels its superiority over Alvan. She has been given an undue amount of freedom, is precocious, decisive, and possesses real force of character as well as charm. Her conversational skill is greatly admired, and she prides herself on her intellectual curiosity and her choice of reading matter.¹ Like her family and friends, she is strong in her racial prejudice against Jews.²

Alvan, the hero, is a labor leader popular among literary and artistic groups. He has had legal training and is a born orator.³ He preaches ardently the doctrine of action and despises the German and English tendency to compromise. He is fearless, quite independent, and utterly irresistible. His previous life has been thoroughly unconventional, but after meeting Clotilde, he decides instantly to embrace the

1 Meredith, The Tragic Comedians, p. 10. "She skimmed philosophy and deep-sounded realistic romances."

2 Ibid., pp. 14-15--especially notable in view of the fact that her mother was a Jewess who turned Protestant at the time of her marriage.

3 Ibid., p. 30.

conventions and shun scandal.¹ He has immense self-confidence and expects to sweep away all opposition by sheer "brain-force."² He also entertains a hearty, robust notion of the equality between the sexes, and hopes that his future wife will enjoy life on a common basis with him.³ Unfortunately he is lacking in a full understanding of women because he has always had such complete success with them.⁴ Most significant are his positive opinions concerning the folly of duelling in which he declares he will never indulge.⁵

Some of the traits of character of both hero and heroine are admirable, while others betray weaknesses. Both are honestly attracted to each other, though part of the attraction may be based somewhat on the fact that friends have talked to each of them about their similarity of appearance, tastes, and ideas. Both have inherent weaknesses which furnish excellent points of attack for the stinging rays of the Comic Spirit. Principal among these weaknesses are Alvan's proud and stubborn determination to observe the conventions, and Clotilde's tendency to be too easily influenced.

The climax of the plot illustrates perfectly the foibles which serve as legitimate targets for the Comic Spirit. Clotilde becomes "thoroughly irrational" after she has been returned to her family by Alvan.

1 Meredith, The Tragic Comedians, p. 106.

2 Ibid., p. 37.

3 Ibid., p. 46--the famous dinner table scene.

4 Ibid., p. 108.

5 Ibid., p. 104.

6 Ibid., p. 111.

She does not know whether she can rely on Alvan's love.¹ Her former independence of judgment is completely gone. She hopes Alvan will understand that she renounced him under protest. The height of her folly is reached when she turns to the Baroness expecting help from a source which would be most unlikely to offer her any protection.² She becomes a perfect example of a "To-Morrower,"³ waiting in a great state of indecision for something providential to happen.

The only excuse for her behavior is that she is a virtual prisoner and cannot cope adequately with the complete reversal of circumstances. The fact that she is suddenly deprived of the freedom she has always enjoyed and taken for granted leaves her bewildered and helpless. Nevertheless the whole situation is open to comic interpretation according to Meredith's theory that any weakness of character may be politely analyzed and thereafter may rouse laughter of the mind.⁴

Alvan's refusal to elope with Clotilde indicates clearly his confidence in his ability to win over her parents. This trait is admirable but also blind⁵ because he fails to realize that Clotilde's description of her parents' prejudices happens to be true. He is eager for conflict and wants nothing so much as a good rousing contest to gain the hand of his

1 Meredith, The Tragic Comedians, p. 112.

2 Ibid., p. 161.

3 Ibid., p. 200--Alvan's name for her.

4 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, p. 82.

5 Meredith, Op. Cit., p. 115.

sweetheart. "Swollen with conceit,"¹ he desires a "parent-blessed bride,"² and is much pleased with himself³ when Clotilde yields and obeys his injunction to return to her parents.

His behavior, like that of Clotilde, may be partly excused. The excuse for his action could be based to some extent on the grounds of his desire for a good reputation and a safe political future which he does not wish to endanger.⁴ But this attitude of his is a self-centered one, wholly motivated by selfish considerations, and is therefore open to comic interpretation. He becomes comic because of his complete breakdown of reason and the dominating emergence of his egoism. "Giant Vanity urged Giant Energy to make use of Giant Duplicity."⁵ Yet he is clear-sighted enough to suffer remorse for having let Clotilde go.⁶ He even admits that women may be "divinely inspired,"⁷ and he finally recognizes and denounces the folly of his own error.⁸

The Comic Spirit enters in full force at the height of the climax. There is "laughter among the gods" over a "giant gone fool."⁹ The

1 Meredith, The Tragic Comedians, p. 122.

2 Ibid., p. 126.

3 Ibid., p. 127.

4 Ibid., p. 138.

5 Ibid., p. 146.

6 Ibid., p. 140.

7 Ibid., p. 141.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 143.

lightning of "death's irony over mortals"¹ is searching and clear. But it is tempered, as it should be, according to Meredith's theory. The laughter is not spiteful nor angry.² Alvan is called a "true man, a native of earth, great-hearted."³

The Baroness von Crefeldt is not entirely subject to the shafts of the Comic Spirit. She is able to appreciate the comedy of the whole situation. Meredith describes her amusingly as "one of those persons who, after a probationary term in the character of woman, have become men."⁴ She is able to see through Alvan but does not let him know it. She is especially amused because of his inconsistencies and lack of insight into women.⁵ She also recognizes his utter and complete unreason in challenging Clotilde's father.⁶ Even when the comedy turns to tragedy, the Baroness remains calm and analytical. She is the only friend to whom Alvan can turn.

Marks, the only other character of any importance, is too shadowy and puppet-like to come directly under the light of the Comic Spirit. He allows Clotilde to make use of him when she wants information about Alvan.⁷ He does display some strength of character when he takes up Alvan's

1 Meredith, The Tragic Comedians, p. 143.

2 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, p. 37.

3 Meredith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 144.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 236--here his "madness was at its climax."

7 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

challenge. But his supreme piece of action at the end is merely the result of an accident. His one sustained trait of character is his dog-like devotion to Clotilde. Meredith evidently does not consider him worth comic delineation.

The catastrophe, which has been very carefully prepared for, turns from comedy to tragedy. The tragedy is a direct result of a fatal flaw in character, but the usual catharsis of pity and terror is not greatly emphasized. Comedy mingles even with the tragic conclusion, which "cannot be laughed at" even though it is described as "lividly ludicrous."¹ Meredith follows his theories of comedy very closely when he observes that Alvan himself would have realized that it was a "jest at life" that his "shipwreck should have been caused by unseaworthy pretensions."² The "unheroic fate" suffered by Alvan is "open to derision" because the "animal nature in him ran unchained and bounding to it."³ It was "stormy blood that made wreck of a splendid intelligence."⁴ His downfall is brought about by the two incongruous sides of his character--the "untamed and the candidate for citizenship in dissension."⁵

Meredith remains true to his theory of the Comic Spirit and thus preserves an impersonal attitude. Hence there is a lack of sympathy for the fate of the hero and a consequent coldness in the psychological analysis of the reason for his downfall. Meredith has often been compared to Shakespeare in his subtlety of character analysis, but, unlike

1 Meredith, The Tragic Comedians, p. 257.

2 Ibid., p. 255.

3 Ibid., p. 256.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Shakespeare, who portrays with much human sympathy his great tragic heroes, Meredith carefully refrains from expressions of pathos. There are no tears for Alvan's fate. He is finally dismissed as a "grand pretender and self-deceiver at discord with life."¹ All that Meredith will allow him is that "most men are simply comic: not many are of a stature and complexity calling for the junction of the two Muses to name them."²

With "poor Clotilde"³ Meredith deals a little more gently. He even forgives her for marrying Marks because her parents urged her on, and Marks was really the only friend she could turn to. Her heart was "always Alvan's."⁴ In the final analysis Meredith is much more lenient with his heroine. Yet he does not let us forget that she "had shifted and wound about, and so pulled her heart to pieces."⁵

Critical opinion concerning the value of The Tragic Comedians has been considerably varied. Some critics have been outspoken in their condemnation of the work. Among them W. C. Brownell is one of the most most severe. He thinks that his devotion to comedy leads Meredith to levity.⁶ This contention seems hardly fair in view of Meredith's own

1 Meredith, The Tragic Comedians, p. 257.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 258.

5 Ibid., p. 253.

6 Brownell, Victorian Prose Masters, p. 261.

theory that comedy is based on a "sober view of life."¹ It is not true that the famous love story is dealt with in a light vein even though the author's point of view may not be warmly sympathetic with the fate of the lovers. Meredith is firmly consistent with his ideas and sustains an impersonal note throughout.

Brownell also deplores Meredith's preoccupation with "brain stuff" which leads him to "minimize passion."² This criticism, too, can be refuted as unfair to Meredith. How could Brownell have belittled the famous passage in which Alvan alternately raged and lamented at the defection of his sweetheart; the description of the intellectual man of forty completely out of control emotionally is a striking one. There is also to be remembered the passage in which Clotilde went through agonies of despair and hope. After all, Meredith follows history pretty exactly: he is not fabricating a fine fiction for our pleasure.

Finally Brownell condemns the characters as wildly theatrical and unreal.³ That criticism does hit the nail on the head, but again Meredith was following facts and could hardly do otherwise than give us the truth.

Several critics, including S. M. Ellis⁴ and J. B. Priestley⁵ agree that the novel was written too hastily and that it suffers from the

1 Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, p. 80.

2 Brownell, Victorian Prose Masters, p. 264.

3 Brownell, Op. Cit., p. 266.

4 Ellis, George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 237.

5 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 42.

inevitable comparison with The Egoist and Diana of the Crossways, which were both written in this same period. Priestley, however, leads the way from adverse to favorable criticism when he gives The Tragic Comedians credit for "great force and drive"¹ and deplores the fact that the book has been so generally underestimated.

A number of critics are inclined to temper their blame with a good deal of praise. Curle, who holds to a moderate ground, values the novel both as a "lesson in philosophy" and an "understanding of the pains of existence."² He calls it an "attempt not altogether successful but significant and arresting along lines of comic comprehension."³

J. H. E. Crees is almost emphatic in his praise of the work as a "masterpiece of subtle psychology and impetuous narrative."⁴ He is inclined to overlook all faults of hasty construction and will not admit that a single blot mars its perfection.

Meredith's own comment throws much light on the subject. He says in a letter to Clement Shorter, written in 1892:--"I put a poor estimate on the book, though it was done with honest endeavor to run with the facts."⁵ And in an earlier document he writes, "I fear you will not care for it. But it is historical, and a curious chapter of human nature."⁶

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 43.

2 Curle, Aspects of George Meredith, p. 182.

3 Ibid., p. 242.

4 Crees, George Meredith, A Study of His Works and Personality, Preface.

5 Forman, Bibliography of George Meredith, p. 64.

6 Ibid., Letter to Sir William Hardman written in 1881.

Probably the true criticism should lie somewhere between the two extremes. The book is obviously not one of Meredith's greatest productions. It shows plainly the marks of hurried composition and is inclined to stress too much the unavoidable overtones of melodrama. But it is certainly a straightforward and honest attempt at a realistic, psychological novel which emphasizes the point of view that Meredith held in common with Browning¹ and Stevenson²--that a vacillating, unreasonable, do-nothing policy is to be condemned. And finally it is an admirable illustration of the consistency with which Meredith held to his theories of comedy and the uses of the Comic Spirit.

1 Browning, The Statue and The Bust.

2 Stevenson, Will-O-The-Mill.

DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS

Three editions of Diana of the Crossways appeared and were exhausted in one year - 1885.¹ The novel had already received partial serialization in The Fortnightly Review.² About two-thirds of it, twenty-six chapters, were published in the magazine from June through December, 1884.³ Translations were made into German and Italian.⁴ The novel was one of the most popular and widely read books of the day.⁵

The chief reason for its popularity was undoubtedly the fact that the novel was based on a real incident in the life of Mrs. Caroline Norton, granddaughter of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who was widely accused of having sold to the Times a political secret confided to her by Sidney Herbert, one of her ardent admirers, who had recently joined the Cabinet.⁶ The secret concerned the sudden determination of Sir Robert Peel to repeal the Corn Laws.⁷ There was a great hue and cry over the affair. Mrs. Norton's husband sued her for divorce, but failed to secure his suit.⁸ The truth was that information

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 98.

2 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith. A Study, p. 152

3 Ellis, George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation To His Work, p.273

4 Altschul Catalogue, p. 99

5 Ibid., p. 99

6 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, pp. 161-2

7 Ibid, pp. 161-2

8 Ibid. pp. 161-2

concerning the Corn Law Bill had been given to the editor of the Times by Lord Aberdeen.¹ Pressure was brought to bear on Meredith by Mrs. Norton's relatives to deny the truth of the legend he had helped to circulate, and Meredith promised to introduce an "adequate refutation of the story he so powerfully helped to promulgate" in the next edition of Diana.² The 1890 edition and subsequent editions were therefore prefaced with an apologetic note.³

A number of letters testify to Meredith's constant preoccupation with problems connected with his heroine during the time he was writing the novel. On March 24, 1884, he writes to Mrs. Leslie Stephen from Box Hill: - "Diana is a terrible woman afflicting me (a positive heroine with brains, with real blood, demanding utterance of the former, tender direction of the latter)."⁴ And on May 19 to the same correspondent:- "Diana is on her sad last way to wedlock. I could have killed her merrily; and that was my intention. But the marrying of her sets me traversing feminine labyrinths, and you know the why of that never can be accounted for."⁵ And on August 23 of the same year again to Mrs. Stephen:- "My 'Diana' still holds me; only by

1 Ross, The Fourth Generation, Reminiscences, p. 352. Letter to Janet Ross from the Marquis of Dufferin, 1896

2 Ibid., p. 352

3 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 162

4 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II, p. 356

5 Ibid., p. 357

the last chapter; but the coupling of such a woman and her man is a delicate business. She has no puppet-pliancy. The truth being, that she is a Mother of Experience, and gives that dreadful baby suck to brains. I have therefore a feeble hold of her; none of the novelist's winding-up arts avail; It is she who leads me. But my delay of the conclusion is owing to my inability to write of late."¹

Evidently as a result of the considerable controversy which developed over Diana, Meredith writes on April 19, 1902 to Lady Ulrica Duncombe:-

Diana wanted (without the wish for) a sturdy mate in her passage through life. She found him after shipwreck, and when she would have preferred some one like to herself, erratic that she was, unbalanced in comparison with the steady Anglo-Saxon woman not yet found out.....Goethe would have appreciated her. Women of distinction have been heard to say that they lived in her more than with their fellows. . . By and by the world will smile on women who cut their own way out of a bad early marriage, or it will correct the present rough marriage system. No young woman knows what she gives her hand to; she will never be wiser until boys and girls are brought up and educated together, let me add, until English girls have wiser mothers. . . So good-bye to Diana. She is one of the women dear to me, and I have tried to expound her to another much dearer."²

Two more brief excerpts from later letters show us how vital and continuous was the interest in Diana. In 1905 Meredith writes to H. W. Strong:- "I have no special choice among the women of my books. Perhaps I gave more colour to Diana and Clara, and this on account of their position."³

1 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II, p. 360. Anxiety over the illness of his wife deprived the author of the power to concentrate on his work. Mrs. Meredith died of cancer in 1895.

2 Ibid., p. 530. Cf. Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 360 for a parallel expression of ideas on coeducation.

3 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II, p. 562

And the following year to Dr. H. Anders:-

I have not made any estimate of the value of my books in prose. I see many faults in all of them, and though I have not striven for perfection, as that would have cramped my hand in writing, something nearer to it would have pleased me. In Diana my critics own that a breathing woman is produced, and I felt that she was in me as I wrote.¹

Diana of the Crossways is the only novel Meredith ever wrote in which the heroine is deliberately and pitilessly exposed to the shafts of the Comic Spirit. But that Diana richly deserves the unveiling of her comic errors and follies is only too clearly seen on a close examination of her character as it is developed in the novel. Her first error is an unsuitable marriage which she contracts much too precipitately because she feels herself in need of protection from the unwelcome advances that have been made to her by the husband of her best friend.² She is a young Irish girl³ very beautiful, witty, and clever, and much sought after in society, and why she should have felt called upon to marry the honorable Augustus Warwick, "a gentlemanly official",⁴ but otherwise a very shadowy presence hovering malignly in the background, is difficult to understand.

1 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II, p. 589.

2 Sir Lukin Dunstance, an amiable but not too intellectual man, husband of Diana's friend, Emma, who is a regular bluestocking, tries to embark on a mild flirtation with Diana.

3 Diana Merian is introduced as an orphan with not too much money. Her mother is never mentioned. Her father, Dan Merian, was a very clever, witty, and popular member of society.

4 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, pp. 48-9.

Even Diana herself apparently never arrived at full comprehension of her motives. In a very unsatisfactory letter to her friend, Emma Dunstance, Diana merely writes that it is the "wisest thing a waif can do,"¹ which mystifies Emma completely. The author intervenes with the remark that possibly she herself "subsequently forgot the specific reason. That which weighs heavily in youth and commits us to desperate action, will be a trifle under older eyes, to blunter senses, a more enlightened understanding."²

At any rate, the marriage is a loveless one, and to make bad matters worse, Diana wastes no time in forming an indiscreet friendship with an elderly gentleman, Lord Dannisburgh, who satisfies her tastes for intellectual and political conversation. The affair is a quite innocent one, but society spreads so much gossip about it that eventually Diana's husband threatens to divorce her. Her unhappiness and her great desire for freedom prompt her to meditate flight from England - a particularly foolish move in view of the fact that it would look like an admission of guilt when she is really innocent. Always inclined to dramatize herself, Diana is filled with self pity while owning privately that:-

1 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, pp. 48-9

2 Ibid. p. 51

she had worn a sort of mask . . . but that she had never worn it consentingly was the plea for now casting it off altogether, showing herself as she was, accepting martyrdom, becoming the first martyr of the modern woman's cause. A grand position! and one imaginable to an excited mind in the dark, which does not conjure a critical humour, as light does, to correct the feverish sublimity. She was, then, this martyr, a woman capable of telling the world she knew it, and of confessing that she had behaved in disdain of its rigider rules, according to her own ideas of her immunities.¹

The comic irony of the situation consists in the fact that while Diana is priding herself on her ability to take care of herself and face the whole world alone, it is really an outside influence which steps in and saves her. Tom Redworth, who plays the part of faithful friend and patient Dobbin,² succeeds in persuading Diana to give up her foolish notion of flight and return to Copsley with him on the invitation of Emma Dunstane. He manages her very cleverly and sees through her folly clearly as a good, quick-witted instrument of the Comic Spirit should. And yet he himself is, to some degree a victim of the Comic Spirit for he is content:-

to play second to her, and not unwillingly. . . but he reflected passingly on the instinctive push of her rich and sparkling voluble fancy to the initiative, which women do not like in a woman, and men prefer to distantly admire. English men and women feel towards the quickwitted of their species as to aliens, having the demerits of aliens - wordiness, vanity, obscurity, shallowness, an empty glitter, the sin of posturing. A quickwitted woman exerting her wit is both a foreigner and potentially a criminal. She is incandescent to a breath of rumour. It accounted for her having detractors; a heavy counterpoise to her enthusiastic friends. It might account for her husband's discontent - the reduction of him to a state of mere masculine antagonism. What is the husband of a vanward woman? He feels himself but a diminished man. The English husband of a voluble woman relapses into a dreary mute.

1 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 87

2 Long-suffering hero of Vanity Fair who finally wins Amelia after much tribulation.

3 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 91

One of the very finest comic portraits in the whole range of Meredith's novels is to be found in the person of Lady Cramborne Wathin,¹ a vulgar, dull, stupid, middle class pretender to social position, Puritanical in point of view and self-righteous in her condemnation of such a forthright woman as Diana.² Lady Wathin's husband had been a mere sergeant-at-law who had "mounted to the Bench and knighthood."³ The poor man felt he was inferior because he "sprang (behind a curtain of horror) from tradesmen."⁴ And so he took to the Bench to "wash out the stain."⁵ Meanwhile his wife, not quite sure of the security of her own position in society and anxious to strengthen it, tries with all the might at her command to add to the scandal that always seems to accumulate around Diana's name.

After the death of Lord Dannisburgh, Diana, who apparently has learned nothing from her first experience in indiscretion, discovers that she is falling in love with young Percy Dacier, his nephew, a rising young Minister of State.⁶ At first Diana refuses to admit that her emotions are becoming involved because that would be a direct contradiction of her proclaimed desire for heart-free independence.

1 A type of social snob that Meredith likes to ridicule. CF. Mrs. Margett Pagnell in Lord Armont and His Aminta.

2 By this time Diana has undertaken a professional career as a novelist and feels herself a "Towering Britomart" (p. 108)

3 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 112

4 Ibid. p. 112

5 Ibid. p. 112

6 This is the title of a successful novel which Diana writes with Dacier as the hero.

But she "deceived her own soul. . . was exultingly proud of her firm footing. . . and was honest as long as she was not directly questioned."¹ Finally, however, she can disguise her state of emotions no further and acknowledges clearly even to herself that she has taken a "course of folly."² At the same time she fools herself into the belief that she has proved her "skill and self-possession to keep him rational and. . . they could continue to meet."³

But the affair has progressed too rapidly for such half-way measures, and it is at this psychological point that Lady Wathin steps in. She is much interested in trying to destroy Diana's influence with Dacier since she is hoping to promote her friend, Constance Asper,⁴ to the favored position she held before Percy fell under Diana's spell. One of the finest comic scenes in the novel is that in which Lady Wathin attempts to effect a reconciliation between Diana and her husband and succeeds only in being repulsed haughtily by Diana and making herself highly ridiculous.⁵

1 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 180

2 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 191

3 Ibid. p. 191

4 Miss Asper, a pale, delicate, haughty heiress, has considered herself virtually engaged to Dacier before the appearance of Diana. Her disappointment had caused her to "plunge into these new spangle, candle and high singing services" - she is "all for symbols, harps, effigies, what not." (p. 176). Another touch of Meredith's comic scorn for "the foolish displays of religion" (p. 176).

5 Meredith, Op. Cit., pp. 196-8. Cf. p. 177 - Lady Wathin feels obliged to "undertake the release of sweet Constance Asper's knight from the toils of his enchantress."

Lady Wathin, as one of the order of women who can do anything in a holy cause, advanced toward Mrs. Warwick, unabashed by the burden of her mission, and spinally prepared, behind benevolent smilings, to repay dignity of mien with a similar erectness of dignity. They touched fingers and sat. The preliminaries to the matter of the interview were brief between ladies physically sensible of antagonism and mutually too scornful of subterfuges in one another's presence to beat the bush. . . .

The aristocratic airs of Mrs. Warwick were annoying to Lady Wathin when she considered that they were borrowed, and that a pattern morality could regard the woman as ostracized: nor was it agreeable to be looked at through eyelashes under partially-lifted brows. . . .

Again the ladies touched fingers, with an interchange of the social grimace of cordiality. A few words. . . covered Lady Wathin's retreat.¹

The climax of the plot, and consequently the climax of the comedy as far as the exposure of Diana's weaknesses and errors are concerned, is reached with Diana's decision to sell the political secret confided to her by Dacier. If she were not supposedly so clever, intelligent, and modern a feminist, her folly would not be nearly so comic. However, in the light of her character, the whole course of her conduct and action is so illogical and inconsistent that it can be interpreted only in terms of Meredith's theory of comedy. As a result, he undertakes a careful consideration and analysis of the mainsprings and motives for her behavior; however unsatisfactory they may be, they do serve as astonishing revelation of the vanity and pure selfishness that are underlying motivating forces for her extremely unintelligent course of action. Meredith's examination of the reasoning that Diana goes through before taking her information to the newspaper editor constitutes a masterly piece of subtle psychological study in characterization.

¹ Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, pp. 196-8

But the height of the comedy comes not with the actual selling of the secret but the reaction to it the next morning when Dacier discovers that the news has leaked out somehow and shows Diana how much the publication of it has affected him.¹ Diana seems not to realize the enormity of her crime.² Naively she asks, "Is it of such great importance?"³ She cannot believe she has done "positive mischief" and tries hard to excuse herself, by protesting that he had not told her the news was a secret.⁴ "I did not imagine it to be a secret of immense, immediate importance," she cries.⁵ A preposterous bit of rationalization for a woman who only the night before had been excitably preening herself on her own importance.

It is impossible to feel even an impulse of pity for Diana when she is plunged into the depths of despair at being cast off by Dacier. There is no room for sympathy for a misguided creature, although she is now fully aware of her guilt, admits that "childish vanity" must have prompted her, and accuses herself bitterly of "folly, baseness, and blindness,"⁶ Her futile attempt to plead temporary

1 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 283

2 Ibid. p. 283

3 Ibid. p. 284

4 Ibid. p. 284

5 Ibid. p. 284

6 Ibid, p. 285

loss of reason and desire for financial independence is worse than useless.¹ It is comic.

Although Percy Dacier is far from being a hero,² it is difficult to condemn him as Meredith does for harshness in casting off Diana. His disgust seems to be perfectly natural and human, despite his creator's stern disapproval. Meredith says:-

He is honourable, courteous, and kindly, a highly civilized gentleman, an excellent citizen and patriot, but icy at an outrage to his principles; and in the dominion of Love a sultan of the bow-string and chopper period, sovereignly endowed to stretch a finger for the scimitared Mesrour to make the erring woman head and trunk with one blow, and away with the remnants.³

The least satisfactory part of the novel is the author's desperate effort to apologize for his heroine and to restore her once more into the good graces of the reader. Dacier will have nothing more to do with her and is therefore mercilessly satirized.⁴ Her real friends, Emma Dunstane and Tom Redworth remain true to her in spite of her faults. Meredith works overtime to make the reader fall in line with their forgiving attitude. But all to no purpose.

1 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 286

2 Ibid. p. 253. Dacier is exposed to all the scorn of the Comic Spirit for lacking all appreciation of intelligence in women and denying them equal opportunity with men.

3 Ibid. p. 289. Cf. p. 314 - for further condemnation of Dacier as a "known, if not common type, of the externally soft and polished, internally hard and relentless, who are equal to the trials of love only as long as 'favouring circumstances nurse' the fair object of their courtship."

4 Ibid. pp. 290-1. The marriage of Percy Dacier and Constance Asper is the subject for much ridicule.

His heroine is far beyond his control. She is now indisputably a Comic Victim, and must remain so till the end of the chapter.

Here is one place where Meredith's theory of comedy runs away with him to such an extent that his own efforts to retrieve his heroine and restore her to popularity are in themselves comic. His own apology for Diana as a "flecked heroine of Reality"¹ is curiously lame.

His argument is

that she is "not impeccable; not an ignorant innocent nor a guileless. . . but a growing soul. . . at best, a singular mixture of good and bad. . . she knocks at the doors of the mind, and the mind must be open to be interested in her."²

Redworth, too, usually a keen-eyed instrument of the Comic Spirit, able to detect comic flaws even in the character of the woman he loves, falls back on the weakest of excuses for Diana's errors. As a spokesman for Meredith's opinions, he is a staunch upholder of the theory that an intelligent woman is the intellectual equal of any man, and yet here he is illogical enough to have to invent lame apologies for Diana's erratic conduct. The whole strength of his argument lies in his belief in the "soul of Diana"³:-

For him it burned, and it was a celestial radiance about her, unquenched by her shifting fortunes, her wilfulnesses, and, it might be, her errors. She was a woman and weak; that is, not trained for strength. She was a soul; therefore perpetually pointing to growth in purification.⁴

1 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 295

2 Ibid. p. 295

3 Ibid. p. 310

4 Ibid. p. 310

Emma Dunstane is another character in the novel who represents the point of view of the clear-eyed critic of the Comic Spirit, and much as she loves and admires Diana, she is forced to the reluctant conclusion that Diana's "intellect was weakened. She had sunk her intelligence in her sensations: a state that she used to decry as the sin of mankind, the origin of error and blood."¹ But the explanation is as unsatisfactory to Emma as it is to the observant critic, for Diana has admittedly fallen far below the requirements held up for a Meredithian heroine. Emma has to acknowledge that "accounting for Diana's conduct is not the same as excusing."²

It is significant that Meredith feels obliged to step in with the statement that:-

she does not show herself to advantage. Only those who read her woman's blood and character with the head will care for Diana of the Crossways now that the knot of her history has been unravelled. Some little love they must have for her likewise; and how it can be quickened on behalf of a woman who never sentimentalises publicly, and has no dolly-dolly compliance, and muses on actual life, and fatigues with the exercise of brains, and is in sooth an alien - a princess of her kind and time, but a foreign one, speaking a language distinct from the mercantile, trafficking in ideas - that is the problem.³

It seems slightly inconsistent that Meredith should still persist in maintaining that Diana has been "struck to the dust for a trifling error, easily to be overlooked by a manful lover."⁴

1 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 315

2 Ibid. p. 316

3 Ibid. p. 326

4 Ibid. p. 327

The statement seems extreme even for a prejudiced author in love with his faulty heroine.

None of Diana's errors is disastrous, however, not even her last one, which she makes before her final capitulation to Redworth. Despite her experiences, Diana has not yet arrived at emotional maturity, for she behaves toward him with a heartlessness that would be discreditable to a coquette in her 'teens. Far worse, however, is her treatment of young Arthur Rhodes,¹ whom she encourages with "utter thoughtlessness of consequences to one who was but a boy and a friend, almost of her own rearing."² Poor Arthur goes about with a "moony air of surcharged sweetness,"³ thinking that Diana must inevitably be falling in love with him. The situation is an impossible one to have been created deliberately by a supposedly sensible mature woman.

There is one last comic scene before the curtain falls, in which Diana still holds out for freedom and independence and asks Emma plaintively if "marriage is to be the end of me?"⁴ Emma replies succinctly, "What amazing apotheosis have you in prospect? And are you steering so particularly well by yourself?"⁵ And so Diana steers safely into the harbor of matrimony and all ends well. At least she is fully aware of her past follies, and perhaps that may provide a basis for future better behavior.

1 Arthur Rhodes aspires to a literary career as a critic. He receives far more encouragement than he deserves from Diana who undertakes to enact the role of patron to the struggling and impecunious young fellow.

2 Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 334

3 Ibid. p. 335

4 Ibid. p. 351

5 Ibid. p. 351

Meredith has an admirable appreciation of the forces of progress in the modern world and of woman's part therein, but the crux of *Diana* is most unfortunate. Her flaws and weaknesses make her an extreme example of comedy, but Meredith is apparently unwilling that his readers should think of her as comic. And here for once his skill fails him, for *Diana* never emerges as a satisfactory heroine either of the romantic or realistic type. She remains essentially what her creator did not desire - a comic character, as comic in her way as Sir Willoughby¹ is in his. The novel as a whole is not a success, in spite of its amazing popularity, and it does not represent Meredith at his best. The dialogue and conversation are far too clever, brilliant, and scintillating to be convincing.² *Diana* herself, in spite of a certain amount of superficial charm, is not an attractive heroine, and the plot is full of out-moded, technical impossibilities.³

Ever since its publication date in 1885, *Diana of the Crossways* has been the subject of much critical controversy. W. E. Henley, writing in The Athenaeum for March 14, 1885, approved of the novel because it was "wholesome with laughter, fruitful with tears, rich

1 Hero of The Egoist

2 The style in general, in spite of some passages which are pure poetry, is Meredith at his worst - the characters converse in epigrammatic terseness which is brittle and artificial to a degree.

3 An outstanding example is Augustus Warwick, *Diana's* first husband, who never actually appears in the story and whose death takes place in accordance with the principles of the creakiest "deus ex machina" devices.

in kindly comedy."¹ A later critic, Jerrold, sees no faults in Diana herself, but praises her as a "great woman greatly delineated," charming and full of delightful Irish wit.² Although Bailey does not hesitate to label Diana as "erratic, irresponsible, inconsistent, and impulsive," yet at the same time he feels that the erring heroine is capable of winning admiration and love from the reader as well as from Tom Redworth.³

On the other side is ranged a greater array of critics who declare boldly that there are indisputable flaws in the novel as well as in the character of the heroine. Oliphant is one of the critics who realizes clearly that if we do love Diana, it is for what she is and what she does, since she has her full share of satire.⁴ Gretton comes out even more outspokenly with the statement that Diana is the feminine *Egoist*, so self-centered that the folly of her betrayal of the political secret cannot be justified even though Meredith tries hard to clear her of blame.⁵ Gretton thinks that Meredith intended to develop her character to show a "soul perpetually growing in purification," but that he did not achieve his purpose, and that Diana is not a successful character.⁶

1 Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism, p. 224

2 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Towards Appreciation, pp. 155-57

3 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, A Study, p. 156

4 Oliphant, Victorian Novelists, p. 193

5 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 167

6 Ibid. p. 172

An extremely severe piece of criticism is that of Beach who considers Diana of the Crossways the "most commonplace" of Meredith's novels because it is the least Meredithian.¹ He admits that it is an interesting story and a good novel as "good novels go," but thinks it is "ordinary in general conception and design" - in its elements of divorce suit, projected elopement, temptation, suspense, and sympathetic treatment of heroine.² Beach says Diana always means well but is subject to human weaknesses.³ Aside from the one comment that Diana is not comic because she makes no false pretensions to nobility,⁴ Beach ignores the problem of Diana as a figure of comedy. It is easy enough to agree with Beach that Diana never pretends to be other than what she is, but how about her innate vanity and selfishness and desire to be thought well of even though she does not deserve our good opinion? Surely these are flaws and errors that lead her in the direction of the Comic Spirit. Meredith maintains that Diana corrects her mistakes and therefore rises about the realm of comedy, but he does not prove his contention

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith, An Interpretation, p. 169

2 Ibid., p. 169.

3 Ibid., p. 169

4 Ibid., p. 23

to our satisfaction. Beach finishes his criticism of the novel by attacking it as lacking in imagination.¹ He says it is a "pale narrative of ordinary people," and the only factor that gives "coherent design" to it is its plea for a better understanding of women.²

Another critic who feels that the novel is not completely successful on account of the unsatisfactory characterization of the heroine is J. B. Priestley. In his opinion Diana is very confused and baffling because she is a heroine of romance³ and at the same time a prey of the Comic Spirit. Priestley criticizes Diana's weakness as a mingling of vanity, self-centredness, infirmity of will, and he says that therefore her misfortunes are a natural result of her frailties, and that she needs Redworth to give her stability and steady direction.⁴ Moreover, Priestley contends that Diana is one of the most strained of all Meredith's witty characters, and this in spite of the fact that Meredith obviously intended her for his chief feminine wit and epigrammatist.⁵ Priestley finishes his strictures with the remark that Diana is like Charles II who never

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 172

2 Ibid., p. 172

3 Cf. Meredith, Diana of the Crossways, p. 295 where Meredith specifically states that Diana is not a "heroine of Romance," but the "flecked heroine of Reality."

4 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 139

5 Ibid., p. 186

said a foolish thing and never did a wise one.¹

The most recent biographer of Meredith, R. E. Sencourt, is equally critical toward Diana and says that throughout her whole career she shows herself a female egoist but that Meredith pays no attention to that.² Sencourt, however, does feel that criticism has to "give way to admiration" in view of the fact that Diana is a woman, witty, charming, and lovely.³ Sencourt succumbs to Diana's charm much as Meredith himself is inclined to.

It seems to be an inescapable fact that Meredith has not succeeded in creating a satisfactory character in the person of his heroine of Diana of the Crossways. As far as his theory of comedy is concerned, Meredith succeeded brilliantly in demonstrating that the weaknesses of vanity and selfishness lead inevitably to errors that are in themselves comic material. But instead of developing his comedy logically and consistently as he has done in The Egoist, for instance, Meredith is unwilling to let his favorite, Diana, occupy a position of ridicule and stand exposed to public scorn as a victim of the Comic Spirit. He fails even to effect a regeneration of her character by means of self-understanding and a healthy sense of humor, although he makes valiant efforts to persuade himself and his readers that he has done so. In spite of himself, Meredith is unable to

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 185. Cf. Baker, A History of the English Novel, Vol. 8, p. 375 - where it is said that Diana is almost too witty to be a real woman.

2 Sencourt, The Life of George Meredith, p. 217

3 Ibid., p. 217.

convince us that Diana is anything but a comic character,
deserving of many more lashes than he is willing to give her.
For once, in his attitude toward Diana, Meredith shows himself
to be what he abhors above all else - the sentimentalist.

ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS

Perhaps the title of One of Our Conquerors was suggested by a line from one of Meredith's own short stories, "The Case of General [○]Aple and Lady Camper," in which Lady Camper, commenting on the ridiculous pretensions of her next-door neighbor, says of him, "He nursed the absurd idea of being one of our conquerors."¹ At any rate, the title, which appeared in the original manuscript draft as A Conqueror in Our Time,² is undoubtedly satirical in its implication that the conqueror's triumphs are destined to be short-lived.

The novel appeared in 1891 and was the first of Meredith's books to receive serial publication in Australia.³ In a letter to John H. Hutchinson, dated October 15, 1906, Meredith writes:

You mention One of Our Conquerors with revulsion. It is a trying piece of work. I had to look at it recently, and remembered my annoyance in correcting proofs. But, strange to say, it held me. A doctor of the insane wrote to my publishers from Australia that the opening chapter showed all the intimations of incipient lesion of brain, and he wondered whether I had studied the disease. Had I done so, I should not have written of it. The novel has value, for containing the characters of Nesta Radnor, Little Shepsey, and Dartrey Fenellan. . . Also I found in it much that is now made manifest of the malady inflicting England.⁴

Priestley is responsible for the statement that Meredith told a reporter that he had inherited a small sum of money and consequently

1 Meredith, Short Stories, p. 313

2 Ellis; George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation To His Work, p. 291

3 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 105

4 Meredith, Collected Letters, Vol. II. p. 586

felt independent enough to determine to serve critics with a "strong dose of my most indigestible production."¹ Priestley goes on to say that if this statement was strictly true and Meredith did deliberately make his later work as obscure as possible, then he ought to have been ashamed of himself.² But Priestley is inclined to think that Meredith was not telling the whole truth and that probably he was the victim of a mannerism that made his work increasingly crabbed and obscure.³ Instead of admitting his weakness, he chose to explain it away by the apparently candid confession that it was deliberate on his part.⁴ Either way, Priestley says, Meredith does not come out of the affair very well.⁵

Sencourt has an interesting theory to account for the very obvious fact that Meredith's last novels are "more complex, more crowded, and more disordered"⁶ than his earlier work. He

1 Priestley, George, Meredith, p. 44

2 Ibid., p. 44

3 Ibid., p. 44

4 Ibid., p. 44

5 Ibid., p. 44

6 Sencourt, The Life of George Meredith, p. 262. Sencourt says that Samuel Johnson's dictum concerning Shakespeare, that a "quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it," was equally true of Meredith who seemed to take perverse pleasure in mystifying his-readers with his metaphorical morasses.

attributes Meredith's stylistic peculiarities to physical causes - after 1880 Meredith's superb health began to fail; he suffered from severe nervous exhaustion and locomotor ataxia which afflicted him increasingly with the years.¹ Sencourt's theory is that the effect of his constant physical strain showed in his writing in the form of an over-wrought, highly artificial, eccentric style.²

It is indisputable that Meredith's baffling obscurities and complexities are particularly pronounced in this novel, but it is also true that once the initial difficulties of style are surmounted, no novel by Meredith is more richly rewarding in its revelation of his great genius. The application of Meredith's theories of comedy and the uses of the comic spirit is made with rare distinction and telling effect, and the blending of comedy with the inevitable tragic outcome is done with real poetic artistry. Despite stylistic defects, the novel is one of the very best of Meredith's achievements.

The opening scene of the novel, though distinctly difficult to comprehend at first glance, is later seen to be significantly symbolic. Victor Montgomery Radnor, a thoroughly self-satisfied and highly successful London business man, a millionaire City merchant, slips on London Bridge and suffers a fall into the mud - very humiliating for a gentleman who "never hitherto missed a step, or

1 Sencourt, The Life of George Meredith, p. 222

2 Ibid., p. 222

owned to the shortest of collapses."¹ When one of the ordinary bystanders helps brush him off, Victor's pride suffers intense mental anguish because he has always held himself superciliously and snobbishly aloof from what he calls the "common herd. . . he

abominated the thought of an altercation with a member of the mob; he found that enormous beast comprehensible only when it applauded him; and besides he wishes it warmly well; all that was good for it; plentiful dinners, costly excursions, stout menagerie bars, music, a dance, and to bed; he was for patting, stroking, petting the mob, for tossing it sops. . ."²

Although Victor is one of the "happiest of human creatures," he cannot entirely ignore the thought of the one error of his youth which he excuses as "an erratic step. . . having youth to plead for it."³ He feels that there were strong extenuating circumstances to explain his hasty, ill-advised marriage when he was very young to a widow many years his senior, and that when he left her to live with Nataly Dreighton, a beautiful and accomplished young woman of about his own age, he was not defying Nature but only Convention.⁴ Mrs. Burman Radnor's vindictive refusal to divorce her erring husband, only makes matters socially difficult for Victor, who is ideally happy in his union with Nataly.⁵

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, p. 4

2 Ibid., p. 3

3 Ibid., p. 10

4 Ibid., p. 11

5 Ibid., p. 11

He carefully explains to a "bosom friend" that he has "never regretted taking the step, in fact has gloried in it - he would do it again, and it was a step necessitated (emphatically) by a false preceding step."¹

What makes Victor Radnor a comic figure is not his defiance of convention and his illegal relationship with Nataly (Meredith considers that a defensible position), but his initial error and his inherent weaknesses, such as pride, egoism, and a snobbish desire for social recognition and prestige.

He places an undue amount of emphasis on what he calls "social influence."² The possession of an elaborate and luxurious country place, Lakelands, gives him a feeling of security and a sense of enjoyment in being able to dispense hospitality on a lavish scale. Yet always in the background there is the lurking fear of exposure by Mrs. Burman or the social sneers and scorn of those who consider themselves morally superior to Victor Radnor and Nataly and their daughter, Nesta. And so perhaps it is only a natural compensation that Victor should set his heart on a determined effort to improve his social standing, he has been snubbed so often by society. Nevertheless the fact remains that he is self-deluded, blind and boastful, and therefore comic. A characteristically cynical epigram from Simeon Fenallan recognizes this trait in Victor - Simeon supposes

1 Meredith, One of Our Conquerors, p. 11

2 Ibid., p. 21

that Victor is courting high society because "Human nature in the upper circle is particularly likeable."¹

Nataly Radnor is one of the loveliest heroines to be found in Meredith's novels. She is a quiet, sweet gentlewoman, but there is a touch of the comic even in her gentle character, for she cannot refrain from a feeling of hypocrisy when she thinks of Mrs. Burman who has prevented her marriage to Victor for over twenty years and thus has made it impossible for them to be accepted by conventional society. Nataly has to

lift a prayer to be saved from darker thoughts, dreadfully prolific, not to be faced. Part of her prayer was on behalf of Mrs. Burman, for life to be extended to her, if the poor lady clung to life. . . Nataly heard the snuffle of hypocrisy in her prayer. She had to cease to pray.²

Moreover, Nataly is guilty of illogical inconsistency in her method of bringing up Nesta very conventionally, trying desperately to shield her from all knowledge of evil - dreading the time when the truth will have to come out. Meredith's remarks on the senselessness of the typical prim Victorian outlook of that day furnish an illuminating commentary on the underlying comedy of the whole situation:

Nataly could smuggle or confiscate here and there a newspaper; she could not interdict or withhold every one of them, from a girl ardent to be in the race on all topics of popular interest; and the newspapers are occasionally naked savages; the streets are imperfectly garmented even by day; and we have our stumbling social anecdotist, our spout-mouthed young man, our eminently silly woman;

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, p. 29

2 Ibid., p. 68

our slippery one; our slimy one, The Rahab of Society; not to speak of Mary the maid and the footman William. A vigilant mother has to contend with these and their like in an increasing degree.¹

Colney Durance, a good reliable friend of the family, who represents a refreshingly satirical view point that reflects Meredith's own candid opinions, sees clearly what Nataly's educational duties as a mother should be and after diagnosing her difficulty as "the prominent feminine disease of the time, common to all our women," his advice is that:

Since we cannot keep the poisonous matter out, mothers should prepare and strengthen young women for the encounter with it, by lifting the veil, baring the world, giving them knowledge to arm them for the fight they have to sustain; and thereby preserve them further from the spiritual collapse² which follows the nursing of a false ideal of our life in youth.

This argument, so completely sensible and modern, is undoubtedly the expression of the author's views on the necessity for the emancipation of women from medieval subjection. At the same time Meredith pokes fun at Colney Durance for being a bachelor, and therefore "but a theorist."³ It is interesting to note, too, that Meredith condemns him on the score of using "dry compressed sentences."⁴ Meredith says that, as a satirist, Colney Durance "too devotedly loves the lash to be a persuasive teacher. Nataly had excuses to cover her reasons for not listening to him."⁵

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, p. 123

2 Ibid., p. 124

3 Ibid., p. 124

4 Ibid., p. 124

5 Ibid., p. 124

Victor is no help to Nataly in her dilemma, for he has "not an idea upon the right education of the young of the sex."¹ His views are thoroughly mid-Victorian:

Repression and mystery he considered wholesome for girls; premature instruction is a fire-water to their wild-in-woods understanding. . . also the facts of current human life, in the crude of the reports or the cooked of the sermon in the newspapers, are a noxious diet for our daughters; whom nevertheless we cannot hope to be feeding always on milk; and there is a time when their adorable pretty ignorance, if credibly it exists out of noodledum, is harmful: - but how beautiful the shining simplicity of our dear young English girls! He was one of the many men to whose minds women came in pictures and are accepted much as they paint themselves. Like his numerous fellows, too, he required a conflict with them, and a worsting at it, to be taught, that they are not the mere live stock we scheme to dispose of for their good.²

He, too, is inconsistently conventional and hence comic in his old-fashioned, Turkish notions about the inferiority of women. He has no conception that they are the intellectual equals of men to be treated as such.

Victor continues hopefully to try to improve his social standing by appointing Lady Blackington's third son to the "coveted post of clerk in the Indian House of Inchling and Radnor. These are the deluge days when even aristocracy will cry blessings on the man who procures a commercial appointment for one of its younger sons offended and rebutted by the barrier of Examinations for the Civil Service."³

One of Victor's most comic follies is his persistence in attempting to break into society. The worst fiasco is his huge musical

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, p. 125

2 Ibid., p. 125

3 Ibid., p. 153

assembly at Lakelands which turns out to be a gathering of mere eccentrics, not the great notables that Victor had hoped to lure to his party. "With more than usual waspishness," Colney Durance enjoys showing up maliciously the foibles and oddities of the various guests - their vegetarianism, teetotalism, abhorrence of tobacco, and so forth.¹ Colney's "satiric spite" lashes out at what he considers Victor's "downright lunacy of the courting of country society by means of cajolement - music, French food, and expensive wines."² Even with Colney Durance, however, acting as outspoken instrument of the Comic Spirit, Victor blindly refuses to admit any shadow of doubt of his "infallible instinct for success."³ And for that very reason he is doubly comic.

A note of burlesque is introduced with the mention of Mrs. Burman, who, as the skeleton in the cupboard, albeit a living one, is characterized as a vindictive hypochondriac. Jarniman, her confidential servant, who procures drugs for her to prolong her useless life, describes his impressions of his mistress to his friend, Skepsey, Victor's clerk, in highly ridiculous terms:

Mrs. Burman said she had dreamed of making her appearance to him on the night of the 23rd August, and of setting the date on the calendar over his desk, when she entered his room: 'Sitting-room not bedroom; she was always quite the lady', Skepsey reported his Jarniman. Mrs. Burman, as a ghost, would respect herself;

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, p. 219

2 Ibid., p. 220

3 Ibid., p. 214

she would keep to her character. Jarniman quite expected the dream to be verified; she was a woman of her word.¹

One of the major comic figures in One Of Our Conquerors is Dudley Sowerby, a model young man, who aspires to marry Nesta Radnor. He is a sound, substantial, moral citizen with station, rank and prospect of a title, but a dreadfully dull, snobbish sort of fellow - a platitudinous Philistine. Through the eyes of Colney Durance, the "professed satirist,"² we see clearly how ridiculous is his transparent self - satisfaction and smug, confident assurance of being an acceptable suitor. Nesta does accept him, but only because she is young and ignorant of love and thinks that he is her parents' choice for her.³ When Dudley is told by Nataly the truth concerning their family relationship, he is full of conventional self-pity to think he has been so deceived.⁴ He cannot help wondering how the scandal could have been so long concealed, for in "his upper sphere, everything was exposed: Scandal walked naked and unashamed."⁵ He hates to admit it, but is obliged to recognize the fact that "this lady (Nataly) was of the mint and coin, a true lady."⁶ And yet, realizing all this, his

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, p. 173

2 Ibid., p. 172

3 Ibid., p. 414 - when their engagement is finally broken, Victor is much disappointed for he "saw the earldom, which was to dazzle the gossips, crack on the sky in a futile rocket-bouquet."

4 Ibid., p. 265

5 Ibid., p. 265

6 Ibid., p. 265

dishonest squirmings to try to secure release from the unwelcome engagement are highly comical. He even protests himself bound in honor to his posterity not to allow any blot on his scutcheon.¹

The one factor that militates against the outrage to his moral sense is the great wealth of the heroine. Her money would be a tremendous asset to him, for "money is the imperious requirement of superior station; and more money and more: in these our modern days of the merchant's wealth, and the miner's, and the gigantic American and Australian millionaires, high rank is of necessity vowed, in peril of utter eclipse, to the possession of money."²

A similar sentiment is cherished by another of the comic characters, the Reverend Septimus Barmby, who seemed a perfectly safe companion for Nesta until he suddenly startles her by proposing to her with complacent pomposity in regular "oratorio fashion."³ He is quite convinced of the efficacy of his own eloquence.⁴ And he is generously willing to overlook the stigma attached to Nesta's birth in view of her wealth.⁵ He admits to himself that there may be a "suspicion of selfishness" in his attitude, but is quickly consoled with the reflection that "Love must needs be an egoism."⁶ For pure

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerers, p. 265

2 Ibid., p. 334

3 Ibid., p. 328

4 Ibid., p. 328

5 Ibid., p. 328

6 Ibid., p. 331

asininity his equal is to be found only in the Reverend Ambrose
 Peterborough.¹

An excellent manifestation of comedy is given in the characters of the Duvidney sisters, Virginia and Dorothea, who are cousins to Victor Radnor. They are elderly, rich, conventional, and self-righteous - typical prim mid-Victorian spinsters. The farcical episode of their little lapdog Tasso is described with comic zeal and gusto. Tasso has misbehaved himself to such an extent that nothing less than a thorough purification with eau-de-cologne will make him fit for any human habitation.² The incident strikes the good ladies as significantly symbolic of Victor's unforgivable sin:

and there came to them the painful, perhaps irreverent, perhaps uncharitable, thought: - that the sinner who has rolled in the abominable, must cleanse him and do things to polish him and perfume before again embraced even by the mind: if indeed we can ever have our old sentiment for him again!³

They are finally persuaded by Victor to receive Nesta for a month's visit in spite of their stern moral disapproval of his way of life. Nesta is received in fear and trembling, but her cousins are reassured to discover she is "of the blood,"⁴ and possesses real poise and breeding. They have the greatest horror and distrust of the "democratic evil spirit abroad. . . perilously communicating its wanton laughter to the desperate wickedness they know.

1 Harry Richmond's inept tutor in The Adventures of Harry Richmond

2 Compare the "Alderman's Bouquet" episode in Sandra Belloni, p. 441

3 Meredith, One of our Conquerors, p. 233

4 Ibid., p. 247

to lurk within."¹ It is interesting to see how cleverly Meredith breaks down their snobbish reserve when they are once brought fully under the spell of Nesta's real, unaffected charm. She is the one and only true conqueror of the story, and this conquest of hers is one of her greatest achievements because it is brought about so naturally and effortlessly.

Except for Nesta's well-deserved happiness at the end of the story, the close of the novel is shrouded in gloom and tragedy. For Victor Montgomery Radnor, the tragedy is that of supreme failure, and in its way, it is as touching and produces as genuine a Katharsis on the reader, as that of King Lear. Indeed Victor's tragedy reminds one a good deal of Lear's fate, for both the Meredithian and the Shakespearian heroes had great possibilities for good but were betrayed by the one fatal Aristotelian flaw in character that led each one to a tragic doom and downfall. Meredith has never written a more affecting scene than that of the closing catastrophe of One Of Our Conquerors, describing the tragic failure of a good man. Yet through it all, the Comic Spirit never ceases to cast an oblique ray upon the shadows, for it was Victor's comic errors and follies that led inevitably to the tragic conclusion.

The novel closes with these fitting words of tribute expressed by Colney Durance:

¹ Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, p. 247

He let Victor's end be his expiation and did not phrase blame of him. He considered the shallowness of the abstract Optimist exposed enough in Victor's history. He was reconciled to it when, looking on their child, he discerned that for a cancelling of the errors chargeable to them, the father and mother had kept faith with Nature.¹

The mixture of comedy and pathos reaches its best expression in the character of Victor Radnor just before the end of his life when he is still meditating on his elusive Idea which he has been pursuing ever since his initial mishap on London Bridge. That mishap might have warned him that his airy ambitions were doomed to failure, but he did not take heed of the warning - till too late. Toward the end of his life, he thinks he has caught hold of the tail of his Idea - something about a concept of:

-a people solidified, rich and poor, by the common pride of simple manhood. . . but the people were a drab, not a shining army on the march to meet the future. His idea looked like a paragraph in a newspaper, upon which a leading article sits, dutifully arousing the fat worm of sarcastic humour under the ribs of cradled citizens, with an exposure of its excellent folly. He would not have it laughed at; still he could not admit it as more than a skirt of the robe of his Idea. For let none think him a mere City Merchant, millionaire, boonfellow, or music-loving man of the world. He had ideas to shoot across future Ages. . . he intended impressing himself upon the world as a factory of Ideas.²

Much of the criticism that has been written on One Of Our Conquerors has concerned itself to a great extent with the stylistic difficulties of the novel. Moffatt declares that no novel ever began worse and that it is deservedly unpopular because it "riots in Meredithese" and is labored with "ornate and forced phrases, unusually

1 Meredith, One Of Our Conquerors, pp. 432-33

2 Ibid. pp. 414-15

recondite allusions, and too many minor characters who are mere bundles of eccentricities, labelled with names."¹ Rather surprisingly enough, Ellis does not consider the novel too difficult reading but does object to the constant "mental convolutions"² and condemns the extracts from Colney Durance's satiric fantasia on "The Rival Tongues" as dull and pointless.³ That the style is much too involved and cryptic is the opinion of Jerrold who dislikes the way Meredith "Bovrilises (if I may be forgiven the word) thought into so small a compass that the sentences are really too meaty."⁴ Gretton's criticism is that One Of Our Conquerors is the most exasperating among Meredith's novels, though admitting it is one of the greatest.⁵ Gretton's chief objection is to the "mania for metaphor" which leads to the most unnaturally fantastic effects.⁶ And finally the admission is made by Priestley that the novel is almost ruined by the "crowds of unimportant and uninteresting characters and the floods of unnecessary talk let loose upon it."⁷ Priestley says that every

1 Moffatt, George Meredith, A Primer to the Novels, pp. 311-12

2 Ellis, George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation To His Work, p. 287

3 Ibid., p. 290

4 Jerrold, George Meredith, An Essay Towards Appreciation, p. 161

5 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 193

6 Ibid., p. 193

7 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 172

sentence "weighs half a ton," and that even Nataly's "trim ship very nearly sinks under their weight."¹ Goldsmith's criticism is as true of Meredith as it was of Samuel Johnson - that he made all his little fishes talk like whales. And yet in spite of that very obvious criticism, both men are still looked up to as preeminent literary figures.

Critical recognition of the element of comedy in One Of Our Conquerors is less pronounced, although a few critics have commented on it in passing. Bailey notices the presence of a satirical attack directed against the shallowness of religion.² Bailey says that it was not Meredith's purpose to make a direct or sustained assault on the church, but that it was his evident delight to ridicule clergy who were guilty of an "elephantine belief in their own superiority."³ Here the object of attack is the Reverend Septimus Barmby who takes himself far too seriously. In this connection Bailey quotes from an interview in which Meredith said:

I hope ultimately we shall take teaching out of the hands of the clergy and that we shall be able to instruct the clergy in the fact that Christianity is a spiritual religion and not one that is to be governed by material conditions. A spiritual God I most perfectly believe in. I have that belief constantly before me - I feel it within me; but a material God that interferes in material, moral affairs I have never seen; and it is, I am sorry⁴ to say, for the material God that the clergy seem to be striving.

Beach comments on Victor Radnor as having the same childlike charm of Richmond Ray and says we enjoy his "flowering, benevolent, optimistic

1 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 172

2 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, A Study, p. 162

3 Ibid., p. 162

4 Ibid., p. 163

nature, while learning the comic lessons of his career."¹ It is easy to agree with Beach that Victor is an actor, an "histrionic self-deceiver,"² but it is not quite so easy to see the likeness between Victor and Richmond Ray; to a certain extent they do have the same characteristics - they are both pleasant and agreeable social companions and both have vaulting social ambitions, but there the likeness ends. There is nothing in Victor Radnor, the prosperous business man, of the dramatic flamboyancy of the impecunious rogue, Richmond Ray.

Moffatt spends considerable time analyzing the causes contributing to the downfall of Victor Radnor, though he does not actually approach the underlying comedy as the principal motivation. He does give recognition to the fact that Victor's "incorrigible optimism" is one cause of his blindness, and that his "unteachable vanity" is responsible for his false attitude toward life, which in turn helps to lead him to ultimate defeat.³

Most of the critics agree in their opinion that Nataly Radnor is one of the most charming and lovable of Meredith's heroines,⁴ but very few have discerned in her character any traces of the Comic Spirit. Crees comes nearest to it, perhaps, in his statement that Nataly Radnor

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 109

2 Ibid., p. 109

3 Moffatt, George Meredith, A Primer to the Novels, pp. 324-5. Cf. Russell, Satire in the Victorian Novel, p. 154 - "the two best studies in egoism are Wilfrid Pole and Victor Radnor."

4 Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation To His Work, p. 288. Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 195 - Gretton compares Nataly to Chloe for warm humanity and pathos.

lacks Victor's "superb confidence" and that she is inconsistent and illogical but very human in being so very conventional in spite of her previous brave defiance of convention and all it stood for.¹ Victor can, until the very end, conquer difficulties by ignoring them, but not so with Nataly. According to Priestley, her position is the cruellest of any Meredith heroine, and she is the noblest of them all: "the breaking of her great heart shivers the whole savage comedy into dust."²

The unique eminence of One Of Our Conquerors is due to the effectiveness with which the elements of comedy and tragedy are blended and framed to produce a unity of impression. The tragedy is very real, very terrible, and thoroughly convincing. Nevertheless its roots lie deep in causes that spring from comic sources. And herein lies the peculiar strength of this novel. Never again did Meredith achieve so perfect a combination of the elemental forces of comedy and tragedy which are here interwoven naturally and realistically. Usually Meredith's efforts at tragedy do not ring true, they seem forced and hollow, or thin and melodramatic,³ but in One Of Our Conquerors the tragedy is very natural outcome of the comedy, and the catastrophe at the conclusion is emotionally affecting and sincere.

1 Crees, George Meredith. A Study of His Works and Personality, pp. 95-6

2 Priestley, George Meredith, p. 185.

3 Particularly the gratuitous catastrophe in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel and the theatrical effects in The Tragic Comedians which only prove truth to be more unreal than fiction - on occasion.

LORD ORMONT AND HIS AMINTA

Lord Ormont and His Aminta appeared in 1894 after having received serial publication in the Pall Mall Gazette from December, 1893 to July, 1894.¹ An American edition in one volume was published in 1894 by Scribner's.² The novel is said to have been suggested by the career of the Earl of Peterborough, who won fame at Valencia but was recalled in 1707 on account of the jealousy of his colleagues and his own high-handed temper.³ Privately married to Anastasia Robinson, a famous singer of the day, he refused to acknowledge her publicly as his wife until a dozen years after their marriage - very near the end of his life.⁴ The similarity between this historical incident and the events depicted in Lord Ormont and His Aminta is very striking, and is one more indication of Meredith's inclination to transfer actual historical or contemporary happenings to the pages of his novels.⁵

Lord Ormont and His Aminta together with One of Our Conquerors and The Amazing Marriage represents Meredith's attempt to examine the various causes of unhappiness in marriage and the struggles of

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 107

2 Ibid., p. 107

3 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, pp. 207-8

4 Ibid., pp. 207-8

5 Cf. particularly The Tragic Comedians and Diana of the Crossways; also note Meredith's constant tendency to use actual persons as the basis for numerous character portrayals in his novels.

men and women to rectify their mistakes in an effort to achieve perfectly mated unions. The three novels are not, strictly speaking, a trilogy, though they are sometimes spoken of as such. They do, however, illustrate Meredith's concern over marriage problems, and they show extremely well how very unconventional and even radical some of Meredith's ideas were. For instance, he was very much in advance of his times in championing the cause of women and favoring greater freedom for them.

Lord Ormont and His Aminta is not nearly so powerful a novel as The Amazing Marriage, but it is very much like it in theme, and is effective and convincing in the sincerity of its plea that fairness and equality are not too much to ask for in the case of intelligent and attractive women who are unhappily married. Carinthia Kirby is a much stronger character than Aminta Farrell, but both eventually succeed in breaking the bonds of an unwelcome and ill-matched marriage, and though Meredith does not dare go so far as to suggest the possibility of complete independence and a separate career for his heroines, however intellectual they may be, he does grant them a measure of freedom and self-expression before they settle down into domestic contentment as happily married wives.

The element of comedy in Lord Ormont and His Aminta is a faint foreshadowing of the bolder strokes to be undertaken in The Amazing Marriage. But despite the fact that Lord Ormont himself is not the equal of the Earl of Fleetwood in comic possibilities, he manages to hold his own very adequately as the chief comic character. When the

story opens, he is introduced as a crusty old soldier nursing a grudge against his native country for some fancied slight, and busying himself with writing letters to the English press.¹ His frightful temper and his "gratuitous Coriolanus haughtiness. . . wears a comical face,"² to his friends who deplore such traits and try to discourage him from making a fool of himself in public: he expresses himself very poorly and although he is a "noble soldier, he had no mould in his intellect or educational foundry for the casting of sentences."³ In other words he was not only incapable of writing a good, straightforward English sentence, but he also fell into the folly of making an unholy spectacle of himself by attempting to wield weapons of sarcasm and irony which he was utterly unable to strike out with effectively. Writing ridiculous letters to the newspapers not only makes him a target for public scorn but also causes him to lose what popularity he had possessed as a soldier, so that his devoted sister, Lady Charlotte Eglett, deems it prudent to try to keep him out of England for a time.⁴

Lady Charlotte herself is one of those favorite and typical Meredith characters, a strong-minded, somewhat eccentric grande dame who is never afraid to say exactly what she thinks when she thinks it. Lady Charlotte is thus an excellent instrument for the Comic Spirit; she is able to see clearly how ridiculous her brother's errors are, and she makes a valiant effort to laugh him out of them, even though

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, pp. 30-31

2 Ibid., pp. 30-31

3 Ibid. p. 32

4 Ibid., p. 31

she is doomed to failure. Her strong sense of humor and desire to indulge herself in her favorite sport of making fun of Lord Ormont is highly reminiscent of Lady Camper's¹ methods of trying to effect reform in a well-loved but caricatured victim.

A plan of campaign is mapped out carefully by the veteran, Lady Charlotte. Her first resolution is to make friends with the newspaper editor to whom Lord Ormont has been sending his "peppery" letters.² She hopes to be able to withhold further letters of her brother from the press, although she realizes fully at the same time that they are a "laugh lost to the world."³ So far, success is hers, and she rests on her laurels. Her one great invincible characteristic is her unerring ability to read men's faults and to manipulate the opposite sex in such a cleverly disguised way that the man has no slightest suspicion that he is being manoeuvred. Meredith says of her:

She read men minutely, from the fact that they were neither mysteries nor terrors to her, but creatures of importunate appetites, humourous objects; very manageable, if we leave the road to their muscles, dress their wounds, smooth their creases, plume their vanity; and she had an unerring eye for the man to be used when a blow was needed, methods of setting him in action likewise. She knew how much stronger than ordinary men the women who can set them in motion. They can be set to serve as pieces of cannon, under compliments on their superior powers, which were not all undervalued by her on their own merits, for she worshipped strength. But she said, with a certain amount of truth, that the women unaware of the advantage Society gave them (as to mastering men) were fools.⁴

1 See the short story - "The Case of General Aple and Lady Camper"

2 Meredith, Op. Cit., p. 36

3 Ibid., p. 36

4 Ibid., p. 38

Unfortunately, however, her well-laid plans are thwarted by an unexpected move on the part of her brother. Thomas Rowsley, Earl of Ormont, has had many romantic adventures in the course of his long career, but so far no woman has ever succeeded in capturing him for a husband. He has a "funny pride, like a boy at a game, at the never having been caught by one among the many he made captive. . . he boasted it to his sister sharing the pride. . . really regretful that no woman had been created fit for him."¹ But now, suddenly, secretly, while living on the Continent, he is reported to have contracted some sort of doubtful alliance with an unknown girl in her teens.² Gossip has it that the girl is a dark Spanish beauty - maybe a gipsy.³ The truth is that Lord Ormont has legally married, at the British Embassy in Madrid, a respectable English girl, Aminta Farrell, who is chaperoned by an impossibly vulgar, socially ambitious, snobbish aunt, Mrs. Margett Pagnell.⁴ But Lord Ormont makes the situation appear very dubious by refusing to introduce his wife into English society and by not even acknowledging to his sister that he is married.⁵

To make bad matters worse, he insists upon living in eccentric seclusion, a voluntary and irritated exile from his native shores, and, for some strange reason, motivated perhaps by his irritation at English

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 37

2 Ibid., p. 49

3 Ibid., p. 49

4 Ibid., p. 49

5 Ibid., p. 49

Society and Government, he undertakes to write his Memoirs -

"pleading his case in mangled English. . . with a stutter of an apology for having done his duty to his country, after stigmatising numbers for inability or ill-will to do it."¹ It is thus impossible for Lady Charlotte to refrain from jumping to the conclusion that "the adoring young woman has induced him to the commission of such folly" and she sorrowfully concludes that "everybody will be laughing at the scornful man down half-way to his knee-caps."²

The plot advances when Lady Charlotte accepts a tutor for her grandson, a young man recommended not by the village clergyman whom she despises,³ but by her Jewish solicitor whom she trusts. The tutor turns out to be Matey Weyburn, a fine-looking fellow, who had been an early, school-boy admirer of Lady Ormont when she was Aminta Farrell. Lady Charlotte does not know this, but decides on general principles to lend Weyburn to her brother as private secretary, hoping thereby to create a domestic diversion if not dissension in the Ormont household.⁴ The remainder of the plot depends on the success of her intrigue, the consequences of which are far more overwhelming than she could possibly have anticipated.

1

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 49

2 Ibid., p. 49

3 Ibid., p. 52. Lady Charlotte's scorn of effeminate clergymen is an accurate reflection of Meredith's own attitude: she "lamented the decay of the good old order of manly English Protestant clergymen who drank their port, bothered nobody about belief, abstained from preaching their sermon, if requested, were capital fellows in the hunting-field, too. . . now we are going to have a kind of bitter, clawed, forked female, in vestments over breeches."

4 Ibid., p. 92

The first result of Lady Charlotte's intrigue is a reaction on the part of Aminta when Matey Weyburn reappears in her life. Unhappy and lonely, Aminta has idealized her memory of Matey, but meeting him again and finding his ambition is to be a schoolmaster, she takes refuge in snobbish ridicule and labels the meanness of his ambition as a "burlesque transformation" of his boyhood dream of military glory.¹ Her own bitter experiences as the unacknowledged wife of her soldier-hero have taught her no real lesson. She still has much to learn and a great deal of suffering to undergo before she can obtain release from the Comic Spirit.

The function of Weyburn is that of a clear-headed, sensible, loyal man who acts as instrument of the Comic Spirit to help bring Aminta to her senses. It is through Weyburn's eyes that the reader sees a transparent comic portrait of Lord Ormont as a "splendid military hero, a chivalrous man, a man of inflexible honour; but one who had no understanding of how to treat a woman or belief in her having equal life with him on earth."² Lord Ormont's worst folly is the senseless way he cherishes his grudge against English society and thinks he can hit back at it by keeping Aminta out of it. He even considers her a "weapon wherewith to strike back at a churlish world."³ His foolish

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 113.

2 Ibid., p. 149. Cf. p. 151 - Lord Ormont's view of his wife as "The Fair Enemy" is typical of the point of view of the pathetic, self-deluded comic victim.

3 Ibid., p. 175

notion that he is doing her no hurt and hitting the world a "ringing buffet,"¹ will soon rebound on his own head, and Matey Weyburn is the only character in the novel who can foresee the inevitable outcome of such ridiculous behavior. But he bides his time quietly and honorably.

It is Weyburn, too, who, probably because of the very fact that he loves Aminta, is able to comprehend her comic weaknesses. The unwelcome attentions of a certain questionably sporty gentleman named Mr. Marsfield awaken conflicting emotions in Aminta. She makes a half-hearted effort to discourage his letters to her, but she reads them, and saves them, and attempts to excuse herself by thinking "what was the reproach if she read the stuff unmoved?"² She retains sufficient sense to realize she is guilty of the "crime of childishness"³ even though her heart is not directly involved in the affair. The whole difficulty is that Aminta wants to be loved but knows exactly how silly she is to let her "mind be occupied recurrently by a man who has not moved the feelings, wicked though it be to have the feelings moved by him."⁴

Aminta is saved from complete exposure to the Comic Spirit by virtue of her innate common sense. Fortunately she is able to recognize her own weakness and by correctly diagnosing her mistakes, she succeeds in avoiding worse ones. She criticizes herself with

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 175

2 Ibid., p. 173

3 Ibid., p. 174

4 Ibid., p. 176

complete justice as a "victim of moods and a compliant coward."¹

Another element in her salvation is her growing appreciation of Weyburn's nobility of character. She begins to understand that there is nothing ludicrous in his ambition to be a schoolmaster, and she tries to show him that she is sorry for the previous snobbishness of her behavior toward him.²

The Marsfield affair might have blown over safely if it had not been for the wicked and foolish way Aminta's aunt, Mrs. Margett Pagnell, tried to encourage the intrigue for the selfish purpose of inflating her own ego which had been woefully deflated by scorns and slights heaped on her by Lord Ormont.³ Aminta warns her that the dangers of encouraging Mr. Marsfield may lead to bloodshed since he has an unsavoury reputation as a schemer, but Mrs. Pagnell, whose desire for social recognition amounts almost to a fetish, replies:

My dear Aminta, whenever I go into society, and he is present, I know I shall not be laughed at, or fall into the pit of one of their dead silences, worse for me to bear than titters and faces. It is their way of letting one feel they are of birth above us. Mr. Marsfield - purer blood than many of their highest titles - is always polite, always deferential; he helps me to feel I am not quite out of my element in the sphere I prefer.⁴

This note of burlesque comedy is carried out still further by the ridiculous episode at Lord Ormont's English country house where Aminta

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 224

2 Ibid., p. 255

3 Ibid., p. 111. Mrs. Pagnell is such an incessant talker that on one occasion the long-suffering Lord Ormont is able to secure peace only by summoning the servants, for "she could be counted on for drawing in her tongue when the domestics were near."

4 Ibid., p. 243

appears accompanied by Mrs. Pagnell and Mr. Marsfield.¹ Lord Ormont angrily orders them all off and sends Weyburn to see that these orders are properly executed. Marsfield, the perfect example of a despicable coxcomb, thinks he can ignore Weyburn as his inferior but soon learns that no avenue except retreat is left to him.² Mrs. Pagnell makes a frightful scene, flings her arms out wildly, "stamps and gibes for sign that she would not be driven."³ But even the redoubtable Mrs. Pagnell is vanquished. The whole fantastic scene has more than a touch of melodrama, as the author acknowledges when he describes it as bordering on the "grisly comic."⁴

Following this climactic incident, the comedy tapers off to quieter tones. Lord Ormont begins to suffer a change of heart, comes round to a "rather healthier mind regarding his country,"⁵ and resolves to make a peace-offering to his wife by introducing her to the English society in which it had formerly been her dearest wish to have rightful recognition. But Lord Ormont has been unjust too long. Aminta is beginning to think for herself, and Weyburn, who analyzes

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 273

2 Ibid., p. 278

3 Ibid., p. 279

4 Ibid., p. 297

5 Ibid., p. 338

her with psychological exactness, is pleased to note that her "mind is at work. One saw already the sprouting of a mind repressed. She had a distinct ability; the good ambition to use her qualities."¹ Freedom beckons! With all the force of her newly-grown courage, Aminta decides that her husband's injustice has absolved her from all necessity of keeping further faith with him. She considers that he has "struck to fragments the barrier of the conventional oath and ceremonial union."²

The only real victim of the Comic Spirit is Lord Ormont, and even he is redeemed in the end and brought around to a subdued and penitent attitude. The final comment on the comic aspect of the impossible marital situation existing between Lord Ormont and his Aminta is made by Weyburn whose understanding of the feminine point of view is said to be due to the fact that he is "neither sentimentalist nor devourer"³ but an ardent champion of the Meredithian doctrine of equality of conjugal rights for women. Weyburn's statement is the expression of his theories concerning coeducation, but they apply with astonishing aptness to the case of Aminta. He says:

Devilry between the sexes begins at their separation. They're foreigners when they meet; and their alliances are not always binding. The chief object in life, if happiness be the aim, and the growing better than we are, is to teach men and women how to

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 338

2 Ibid., p. 366

3 Ibid., p. 356

be one; for, if they're not, then each is a morsel for the other to prey on.¹

One of the earliest and most interesting pieces of criticism on Lord Ormont and His Aminta appeared in August, 1894. Henry James wrote a highly adverse review of the novel which he declared "filled him with rage and fury"; he objected to it violently on the score that it possessed "too much verbiage, no reality, too much obscurity and alembications."² These strictures are especially amusing in view of the obvious fact that Henry James constantly offended the canons of good English in precisely the direction that he objected to in George Meredith. His accusations against Meredith are unquestionably true but they do rebound with amusing repercussions on his own head.

Most critics find no difficulty in agreeing with James that Lord Ormont and His Aminta is an irritating book because of its stylistic perversities. It almost seems as though Meredith took a special delight in lengthening his sentences and obscuring his allusions for the particular purpose of tripping up his readers and increasing their difficulty in comprehending his esoteric and epigrammatical elisions. But if the style represents Meredith at his wilful worst, the plot and characterization by no means receive condemnation. True, the novel does not measure up to Meredith's finest achievements, but it does not deserve to be passed over lightly merely on account of its "wind-in-the-orchard"³ style and the slightness of its theme in

1 Meredith, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, p. 360

2 Quoted in Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 306

3 Meredith, Beauchamp's Career, p. 18 - an epithet used by Meredith to describe Carlyle's style, it is particularly applicable to Meredith's own eccentricities and affectations of style.

comparison with the other novels in which Meredith subjected the marriage problem to close scrutiny. The plot is unusually straightforward and simple in construction, and the characterization is psychologically sound¹ and subtle. Moreover the element of comedy and Meredith's application of his theories of the comic spirit merit special attention in a study such as this.

Not all the critics who have written on Lord Ormont and His Aminta agree concerning the effectiveness of its conclusion and the part played by Lord Ormont at the end of the story. Jerrold thinks that the finale is managed most adroitly and that Lord Ormont's sudden access of magnanimity increases the readers' respect for him after he has almost forfeited it by his unkind behavior to Aminta and his "angry pride."² Bailey, too, is of the opinion that Lord Ormont's character acquires real nobility by virtue of his forgiving conduct.³

Ellis, on the other, is extremely caustic in his criticism of the conclusion which he terms scornfully "ridiculous vagaries in the Holy Estate of Matrimony."⁴ It seems to him quite impossible that Lord Ormont, formerly a "fire-eater and deadly duellist," should make such surprisingly meek arrangements to send his grand-nephew to the school conducted by the "erring gentleman and lady."⁵ Ellis cannot

1 Except perhaps in the case of the last-minute repentance of Lord Ormont which is considerably open to criticism.

2 Jerrold, George Meredith. An Essay Towards Appreciation, p. 169

3 Bailey, The Novels of George Meredith, A Study, p. 174

4 Ellis, George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 291

5 Ibid., p. 295

conceive that such a "farcical finale" could have been intended seriously.¹

Beach's criticism is not substantially different from that of Ellis. Indeed he feels that the conclusion is comic "like the end of a fable."² The real irony of the situation is that by the time Lord Ormont is ready to acknowledge Aminta, the lady has transferred her affections to another and better man.³ Lord Ormont himself is subjected to severe scrutiny on the score of his shallow, conventional, selfish attitude toward women.⁴ He appears to Beach like a sulky Achilles whose vanity has been injured and who refuses to poke his head out of his tent.⁵ But Beach does not give him credit for being a full-length comic figure but only a ghost-like semblance of comedy.⁶

Whether or not Lord Ormont's repentance is convincing, the fact remains that it comes too late in the course of the plot to have any material effect on the fate of the various characters. As a forgiving and amiable old gentleman he may sprinkle a little happiness, but the comic spirit has already exhibited him unmistakably for what he really is - a deluded, selfish egoist with a strong streak of sentimentality.

1 Ellis, George Meredith, His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, p. 295

2 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation. p. 173

3 Ibid., p. 173

4 Ibid., p. 173

5 Ibid., p. 173

6 Ibid., p. 173

As for Aminta, it would be hardly fair to condemn her out of hand for erratic behavior on the basis of "instability and irrationality of the feminine sex when caught in Cupid's toils", as Ellis does.¹ Nevertheless, as we have proved, she is guilty of a number of comic weaknesses which she has to overcome before she can be worthy of the name of heroine. We cannot agree with Oliphant that she had no right to leave Lord Ormont.² It is perfectly easy to understand why and how her immature hero-worship of her Coriolanus - husband changed inevitably to something worse than contempt. Any young woman of proper spirit might well have turned rebel against the onslaughts of petty spite which she was expected to endure tamely and submissively.

Lady Charlotte Eglett and Matey Weyburn, though in very different ways, are good examples of the way in which Meredith makes use of level-headed, sane, sensible, healthy persons with keen senses of humor as instruments of the comic spirit to point out to the comic victims the error of their ways. Sometimes they succeed in restoring the victim to a correct balance and perspective once more, as in the case of Aminta, although her salvation was largely self-achieved. Sometimes they fail, as in the case of Lord Ormont, for his eleventh hour repentance is hardly more convincing than that of Edward Blancove.³

1 Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation To His Work, p. 296

2 Oliphant, Victorian Novelists, p. 199

3 Hero-villain in Rhoda Fleming.

On the whole, the element of comedy, though present in the novel, is not so powerful a factor in the development of plot and character as it usually is in a Meredith novel. Both plot and character are, to a great extent, dependent on the play of the Comic Spirit and the way it operates on men and women and the motivation of events, but in this particular novel the comic element is not carried out so convincingly as in the novel which followed it - The Amazing Marriage.

THE AMAZING MARRIAGE

A condensed version of The Amazing Marriage appeared serially in Scribner's Magazine, January to December, 1895, the same year of its publication.¹ Meredith told Robert Louis Stevenson that the story had been begun in 1879, that one quarter of it was completed, that it was then laid aside until 1893 when it was resumed at the suggestion of Meredith's friend, Frederick Jameson, to whom the novel in its final form was dedicated.² Incidentally it is of interest to note that Stevenson, who inspired the character of Gower Woodseer, and who took a great interest in the progress of the novel, died in 1894, one year before its publication.³

Although Meredith's last novel has a plot that is fully as amazing as its title suggests with plenty of improbable situations bordering on burlesque, nevertheless the story itself is powerful and convincing, and the characterization is subtle and psychologically sound. The element of the Comic Spirit, too, enters in and plays a large and effective part in the development of the theme. As usual, in conformance with Meredith's philosophical theories of comedy, there is only a slim, hairline distinction drawing a dividing line between

1 Catalogue of the Altschul Collection of Meredith at Yale, p. 108.

2 Ellis, George Meredith, p. 299.

3 Ibid., p. 300.

the two effects--comic and tragic--that are usually considered worlds apart. Meredith's concept that a man's weaknesses and errors may be so ridiculous as to be comic also leads him to the acceptance of the Aristotelian dogma that any virtue carried to excess will inevitably result in vice, and such a character, starting his career with a few minor faults may be betrayed into disaster through his own foolish pride, vanity, obstinacy, egoism, or the like.¹

So in The Amazing Marriage the chief comic character, the young Earl of Fleetwood, possessed of potentialities for real nobility of character,² is dragged down to tragic defeat by his own inherent weaknesses.³ The author's concluding words on the importance of characterization contain the following illuminating hints concerning his methods and purposes:

Character must ever be a mystery, only to be explained in some degree by conduct; and that is very dependent on accident: and unless we have a perpetual whipping of the tender part of the reader's mind, interest in invisible persons must needs flag. For it is an infant we address, and the story-teller whose art excites an infant to serious attention succeeds best; with English people assuredly I rejoice to think, though I pray their patience here while that philosophy and exposure of character block the course along a road inviting to traffic of the most animated kind.⁴

1 Compare similar effects in Shakespeare's tragedies: Lear, Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet where the catastrophe in each case is due directly to a flaw in character leading to mistakes, errors, and blunders that cannot be rectified.

2 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, p. 35--He is described as a "very powder-magazine of ambition and never would break his word; which is right if we are properly careful."

3 Ibid., p. 91--His chief weakness is that he is a flinty young despot. . .sensitive to the faintest offense."

4 Ibid., p. 551.

The marriage itself, which is not nearly so amazing as its consequences, is explained naturally enough as having been made on a sudden, impulsive, jealous rebound because the beautiful but fickle Henrietta Fakenham has jilted the Earl of Fleetwood in favor of Chillon Kirby, whose sister, Carinthia, suddenly and almost inexplicably finds herself the legal but unacknowledged Countess of Fleetwood. The situation is full of comic possibilities which center around the self-deception of young Fleetwood, who is too proud even to admit that he is wrong or that he has done an injustice to a lovely girl who does not deserve such ill treatment. His egoism is colossal when he reflects angrily and incorrectly that he has been tricked into marrying Carinthia who accepted him too promptly. He repents his hasty and ill-advised marriage but bolsters his pride by the thought that he is "renowned and unrivalled as the man of stainless honour: the one living man of his word. He had never broken it--never would. There was his distinction among the herd."¹

Taking his bride to a prize-fight on her wedding day is heartless, but leaving her on the wedding night "with murky laughter" is nothing less than cruelty "of the kind that plain mortals, who can be monsters, commit."² Meredith's comment on the incongruous situation is that

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, p. 164.

2 Ibid., p. 194.

"comic romance is about us everywhere, alive for the tapping."¹

In this connection we must take notice of the fact which is significant in itself that Carinthia, though she is subjected to a situation that is essentially comic, has too much dignity and simple sincerity to be exposed to the shafts of the Comic Spirit. She rises above the level of comedy by virtue of her frank naturalness and her refusal to submit to indignity or to be martyred. Her romance may be comic and

we could almost laugh at our human fate, to think of a drop off the radiant mountain heights . . . gathering the title of Countess midway. But nothing of the ludicrous touched her; no, and if we bring reason to scan our laugh at pure humanity, it is we who are in the place of the ridiculous for doing what reason disavows.²

Immediately after the marriage all Fleetwood's friends and acquaintances set to work to try to explain his puzzling behavior. Gower Woodseer, the homespun philosopher, attributes it partly to his lack of humane feeling which is an indication of the "lower man," and partly to the fact that he covets beauty in women and yet seems to have been born "hostile to them."³ Lady Arpington, one of Meredith's eccentric, strong-minded noblewomen,⁴ who is never afraid to face facts, calls Fleetwood to strict account for the lunacy of his actions. She has been informed by Admiral

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, p. 195.

2 Ibid., p. 217.

3 Ibid., p. 224.

4 Ibid., p. 245--"a loud-voiced lady given to strike out phrases"--very much like Lady Charlotte Eglett in Lord Armont and His Aminta or Lady Mountstuart Jenkinson in The Egoist.

Baldwin that Carinthia is a sensible and worthy wife, "not of a totally inferior family," and she succeeds in making Fleetwood very uncomfortable, "drenching him with ridicule" very effectively.¹

Meanwhile Dame Gossip, acting as Comic Chorus, comments on the hue and cry raised by the amazing marriage. Incredible reports are circulated wildly and eagerly. In mock-heroic vein Dame Gossip confides to the reader in a stage whisper:

Lord Fleetwood and his Countess composed the laugh of London. Straightway Invention, the violent propagator, sprang from his shades at a call of the great world's appetite for more, and, rushing upon stationary Fact, supplied the required. Marvel upon marvel was recounted. The mixed origin of the singular issue could not be examined, where all was increasingly funny.²

Sir Meeson Corby, Fleetwood's parasitic hanger-on, adds to the hubbub and uproar and feels the "tipsy happiness of being certain to rouse the laugh wherever he goes. Important to himself in an eminent degree, he enjoyed the novel sense of his importance with his fellows."³

One of the comic incidents in connection with the "boiling topic of current scandal"⁴ is a street fist fight described in burlesque style to throw Fleetwood into as strong a light of ridicule as possible. Carinthia, an "unknown Britomart," appears from nowhere and takes her "station

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, p. 243.

2 Ibid., pp. 252-3.

3 Ibid., p. 254.

4 Ibid., p. 261.

beside Lord Fleetwood . . . defended him, warded and thrust for him, only for him, to save him a touch; unasked, undesired, detested for the box on his ears of to-morrow's public mockery, as she would be, overwhelming him with ridicule. Have you seen the kick and tug at the straps of the mettled pony in stables that betray the mishandling of him by his groom? Something so did Fleetwood plunge and dart to be free of her, and his desperate soul cried out on her sticking to him like a plaster."¹

The climax of the comedy is reached after the birth of the amazing baby. Fleetwood considers this event as a "further and grosser offence"² on Carinthia's part. He will not admit even to himself that his behavior has been highly reprehensible, that he has been guilty of worse than folly, and so he shuts "himself up and away from her, and the world sat on him heavily."³

Reflection finally brings repentance and from then on, Fleetwood's character begins to lose its comic aspect and take on a soberer coloring which finally turns to complete tragedy with the realization that his change of heart has come too late. In the meantime the young nobleman

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, pp. 259-60. Cf. p. 261--"He tossed his dignity to recklessness, as the ultra-convivial give the last wink of reason to the wine-cup. Persecuted as he was, nothing remained for him but the nether-sublime of a statuesque desperation."

2 Ibid., p. 297.

3 Ibid.

begins to worry about his treatment of Carinthia, wishes vainly for a reconciliation but does not know how to manage it, and also inconsistently enough is tormented by an unreasonable desire to humble Henrietta.¹ As an opening but futile gesture of reconciliation towards Carinthia, he secretly and mysteriously sets up a fruit and flower shop in London for Sarah Winch in recognition of kindness done to Carinthia by her sister, Madge.² Gossip has it that he intends to establish the Countess as a business woman so that she can be independent.³ Everyone makes fun of him though he appears "entirely unconscious that each step he now took awakened peals. For such is the fate of a man who has come to be dogged by the humourist . . . he is the more laughable if not in himself a laughable object."⁴

Gower Woodseer again undertakes to analyze the sources of Fleetwood's comic weaknesses and accurately puts his finger on the primary cause--his disregard of women as intellectual equals of men.⁵ Gower's penetrating lecture on what it means to have a proper regard for Nature as manifested in women shows that he is the instrument of the Comic

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, p. 313.

2 Ibid., pp. 308-310. Cf. p. 313--"a wealthy despot with no conception of any hum around him, will have the wags in his track Fleetwood was honestly unaware of ridicule."

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 352.

Spirit to point out to Fleetwood some salutary truths.¹ The pathos consists in the fact that the truth is revealed to Fleetwood too late to effect salvation for his soul.

Ironically enough, Fleetwood, in his failure to win back Carinthia, hopefully seeks solace and comfort in Roman Catholicism, for which Meredith flays him mercilessly.² Meredith considers his ultimate actual adoption of Catholicism as a final betrayal of essential character weakness and as a "dreaded evil."³ And so Fleetwood ends his days in bitter repentance, now fully realizing the folly and error of his ways, but too late to regain his sanity--a comic figure turned tragic.⁴

Among the remaining characters the finger of the Comic Spirit touches lightly upon Chillon Kirby who exemplifies perfectly the snobbishness and class consciousness that Meredith loves to hold up to ridicule and scorn. His attitude toward Gower Woodseer is

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, p. 352.

2 Ibid., pp. 444, 457. Satire is heaped on Fleetwood for falling under the influence of Lord Feltre, "the monastic man of fashion, an insignificant, brainless creature, who croons condolences with a stretched waxen hand."

3 Ibid., p. 549. Cf. attitude toward Catholicism of Countess de Saldar in Evan Harrington.

4 Ibid., Chapter XLIII--"On the Road to the Act of Penance"--p. 489--"half our funny heathen lives we are bent double to gather things we have tossed away."

typical. He looks down on him as a "mere, unambitious bootmaker's son . . . with heterodox ideas"¹ which his own soldierly training led him to laugh at. When Carinthia expresses concern for the injured gentleman, Chillon begs to inform her "for the sake of educating her in the customs of the world" she is about to enter that the "word gentleman conveys in English a special signification."² And when she goes on to wonder whether they will ever meet again, Chillon further instructs her--"my dear, you meet people of your own class; you don't meet others."³ In spite of such snobbishness Chillon does feel a sort of grudging admiration for Woodseer's "manliness in bluntly telling his origin and status."⁴

A similar but less significant comic figure is that of Sir Meeson Corby who occupies the unenviable position of parasite to Lord Fleetwood. He is a grotesque caricature in the Dickens manner, the last lingering manifestation of Dickens' influence on Meredith.⁵ "Excessively obsequious, a wretched satellite," he is very much aware of class distinctions, and therefore to him the

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, pp. 67-68.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 89. "A plump little beau of forty, at war with his fat and accounting his tight blue tail coat and brass buttons a victory . . . he looked wound up for a dance . . . fixed in a perked attitude of inquiry."

spectacle of the wealthiest nobleman in Great Britain tramping the road, pack on back, with a young nobody for his comrade, a total stranger, who might be a cut-throat, and was avowedly next to a mendicant, charged him with quantities of interjectory matter Hundreds of thousands a year, and tramping it like a pedlar, with a beggar for his friend!¹

His amazement at Fleetwood's democratic acceptance of the society of Gower Woodseer is exceeded only by his further horror at Gower's familiarity with Carinthia.²

Ordinarily Meredith spares his feminine characters from the shafts of the Comic Spirit; indeed he is more than likely to make use of them as clear-sighted instruments of comedy to point out follies and errors of the comic victims. But occasionally one of his women betrays comic weaknesses herself, and here we find Henrietta Fakenham Kirby an ideal target for comic scorn because of her shallow selfishness and frivolous devotion to social pleasures. Once she has married Chillon, she begins to pity herself as a poverty-stricken creature-- "she classed herself with the fallen and pinched; she harped on her slender means, on the enforced calculations preceding purchases, on the living in lodgings here was the skeleton of the love match, earlier than expected."³

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, pp. 93-94.

2 Ibid., p. 127. "He had intimations of the disintegration of his country if a patent tramp burlesquing in those clothes could be permitted to amuse English ladies of high station, quite at home with them. Among the signs of England's downfall, this was decidedly one."

3 Ibid., p. 263. Cf. p. 523--"As well bid healthy children lie abed on a bright summer morning, as think of holding this fair young woman bound to the circle of safety when she has her view of pleasure sparkling like the shore-sea mermaid's mirror."

Finally there is the comedy of situation. As in Beauchamp's Career where the game of politics was made a subject for comedy, so here the folly of gambling is held up to ridicule. Those "devotees of the sable goddess" of Fortune, worshipping at the "sprightliest of the ante-chambers of Hades" are described as "simple fools tragical children of folly playing with lightning feverish attendants of the phantasmal deity."¹ They are in search of "thrills and shocks" until finally their "blind folly" brings them "cruel reverses," and the "purse is an empty body on a gallows, honour, too, perhaps."³ One of the most biting miniature portraits is that of Captain Abrane, one of the Countess Livia's "numerous courtiers" who is sketched memorably as a "colossus inactive; he had little to say among the chattering circle; for when seated, cards were wanted to animate him: and he looked entirely out of place and unfitted, like a great vessel's figure-head in a shipwright's yard."⁴

The Amazing Marriage has roused varying comment among discerning critics. Perhaps the highest and most unqualified admiration is that of Jerrold who praises it as one of Meredith's most fascinating novels.⁵

1 Meredith, The Amazing Marriage, pp. 96-97.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 98.

5 Jerrold, George Meredith, An Essay Towards Appreciation, pp. 170-172.

Like The Adventures of Harry Richmond, it has a glamour of irresponsible romance that is irresistible.¹ Even its wild improbabilities are made to seem real and convincing, and the characters are vital and full-blooded.² Jerrold admits a slight feeling of disappointment at the conclusion which he believes is not thoroughly satisfactory.³ It seems to him that the marriage of Carinthia and Owain Wythan is something of a shock although he is perfectly willing to concede that their union may prove a very suitable and happy one.⁴ On the whole he approves heartily of the novel as one of the best performances of its author.⁵

Ellis, too, praises the novel as delightful in spite of its freakish and somewhat warped impossibilities of plot construction.⁶ He condemns the whole episode of what he calls the "Amazing Baby" as akin to the realm of French farce.⁷ And he would have preferred a serious treatment of the problem of a reconciliation between Fleetwood and Carinthia.⁸ However, when all the improbable absurdities

1 Jerrold, George Meredith, An Essay Towards Appreciation, pp. 170-172.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., pp. 174-175.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, pp. 302-303.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

are put aside, this tragedy of love that came too late on one side after it was lost on the other, strikes Ellis as acutely moving.¹ The character of Fleetwood appeals to him greatly because of its wealth of possibilities and complexities.²

Another critic who bestows the very highest praise upon The Amazing Marriage is Mary Sturge Gretton who says that it "equals any of its predecessors in creative energy."³ She goes on to analyze the outstanding characters in the novel, placing special emphasis on the heroine whose fatal flaw she considers to be unimaginativeness and lack of sympathy for Fleetwood.⁴ Carinthia is unable to appreciate his subtle and delicate emotions.⁵ While he is admittedly over-sensitive, she is over-literal and altogether too simple and unsophisticated.⁶ This is unusually severe criticism of a heroine whom most critics consider ideal in respect to charm, courage, and innate strength of purpose. Miss Gretton, however, does agree that Carinthia's character is built on a heroic scale and that her "grandeur" and constancy make up in some degree for her lack of imagination.⁷ Miss Gretton is inclined to view

1 Ellis, George Meredith. His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work, pp. 302-303.

2 Ibid.

3 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, p. 216.

4 Ibid., pp. 226-231.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

the character of Fleetwood with surprising leniency. She says that his errors are excusable as his circumstances are more involved and complex.¹ The fact that he is haunted by his mistakes and worried by his conscience appears to excuse his cruelties in Miss Gretton's eyes. But when he contemplates suicide, that is another matter, that cannot be so readily overlooked. His final weakness, which leads him into the Catholic Church, is the one irretrievable error and folly that proves disastrous.

Beach has some illuminating remarks to make concerning the comic aspects of the character of Fleetwood who is unable to recognize real romance when he finds it because he is too easily offended by natural wholesomeness.² He is a deluded comic figure, for he is self-deceived and thinks he wants romance, but fails to realize he has it.³ His wounded egoism leads him to undertake unworthy schemes and intrigues that eventually result in his undoing.⁴ His pseudo-mysticism is only an attempt to escape reality.⁵ Beach believes that he is a worse type of egoist than Sir Willoughby Patterne because his egoism takes on the form and shape of a sickly sentimentalism, whereas Sir Willoughby at least displays a healthy rather than a decadent egoism.⁶ This comparison is

1 Gretton, The Writings and Life of Meredith, pp. 226-231.

2 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation, p. 147.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 150.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 153.

somewhat finely drawn to an impartial critic who inclines to the belief that Sir Willoughby himself is something of a sickly sentimentalist at heart, but perhaps one would grant that if hair-splitting distinctions are to be made, Fleetwood's egoism is a shade worse than that of his more famous predecessor. Beach points out that Fleetwood's tragedy is essentially that of the discouraged sentimentalist.¹ Although Beach does not make the comparison, it is difficult to refrain from commenting on the similarity between Fleetwood and Sir Purcell Barrett.² Their circumstances are very different, and Fleetwood's death may have been a natural one, though Meredith is not too explicit about it, and he has hinted at the previous contemplation of suicide, but in their failure to meet life squarely and face its realities honestly, they are inevitably very much alike.

Meredith's last novel is undoubtedly a brilliant piece of work and shows no falling off in power from the best achievements of his earlier years. Stylistic difficulties and plot complexities are not nearly so noticeable as in Lord Ormont and His Aminta or One of Our Conquerors. In fact The Amazing Marriage is surprisingly free from those tortured expressions and episodic involutions that beset many of his earlier novels. In adhering to his theories of comedy and applying

1 Beach, The Comic Spirit in George Meredith. An Interpretation. p. 153.

2 Secondary character appearing in Sandra Belloni.

them to characterization and situation, Meredith has here followed out to its logical conclusion the consistent line of development that was begun in The Shaving of Shagpat and continued throughout during the entire course of his career as a novelist.

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A STUDY OF GEORGE MEREDITH'S PROSE FICTION
IN THE LIGHT OF HIS THEORY OF COMEDY AND THE
USES OF THE COMIC SPIRIT

The Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

BOSTON UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL

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A DIGEST OF THE DISSERTATION

The opening section of the dissertation is devoted to a brief survey of the comic tradition in English fiction in order to establish a point of contact for the critical consideration of George Meredith's position in the field. A careful correlation is drawn between the various types of comedy, and an attempt is made to describe the growth and development of the comic technique, beginning with its earliest crude manifestations in the medieval miracle and morality plays where comedy is introduced into otherwise solemn, religious dramatic performances merely incidentally in the form of pure comic relief.

The penetration of the classical influence of Plautus and Terence is shown in Roister Doister and Gammer Gurton's Needle. Thereafter the refinement of comedy is traced in the work of such notable playwrights as Lyly, Greene, and Peele. Grossness and vulgarity gradually are replaced by a form of real wit, which, though artificial and somewhat bombastic, is nevertheless a lively and welcome change from the heavy-handed crudities which preceded it.

Consideration is given to the distinct contribution of Ben Jonson and Shakespeare who helped to raise comedy from a low level to a height that it has never surpassed. Ben Jonson's conscious elaboration of the "humour" theory in realistic comedy gives rise unwittingly to the school of Smollett and Dickens where caricature reigns supreme. It is pointed out that Shakespeare, although not averse to low comedy, paves the way for the tolerant use of high comedy as in *Twelfth Night* where folly, vanity, and self esteem are held up to playful ridicule.

Dramatic comedy suffers a sharp decline during the later Elizabethan period with its prevailing tone of cynicism and smartness which is a direct foreshadowing of the sophisticated artificiality of Restoration Comedy. In spite of Charles Lamb, who takes up the cudgels vigorously in defense of Wycherley and Congreve, the general opinion is that their use of comedy is deplorably decadent and degenerate.

In the field of the novel pure comedy springs into a surprisingly complete perfection in that delightful parody, Joseph Andrews. Fielding is the first novelist to formulate a theory of comedy which he presents in his famous Preface to Joseph Andrews. His successor, Smollett, although not his equal in the mastery of comic technique, does, however, excel in the mixture of satire and buffoonery with which he invests his picaresque plots. Such a novel as The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom is no match for Fielding's Jonathan Wild, which it tries to resemble, but is, nevertheless, a lively and spirited if less sustained piece of irony.

Sterne and Goldsmith inaugurate the sentimental school of comedy which depends to a very large extent on its moralizing aspects rather than on pure comedy. The latter part of the eighteenth century is represented by Fanny Burney who carries on the Jonsonian "humour" tradition with her Evelina and Cecelia, and by William Beckford, whose Vathek offers some striking similarities with Meredith's The Shaving of Shagpat.

In the nineteenth century Jane Austen is an outstanding example of a novelist whose work is colored and permeated with the essence of true comedy. One of the minor novelists, John Galt, is singled out for special mention by Meredith in his critical essay as one whose "neglected

novels have some characters and strokes of shrewd comedy." Thomas Love Peacock's novels possess a peculiar comic genius which is reflected with unconscious accuracy in many of Meredith's novels. With the advent of Dickens we find comedy reverting once more to the Jonsonian type of "humour" characters best expressed in the unmistakable caricatures which in spite of perverse exaggeration still carry within themselves an energetic sense of vitality and reality. And Thackeray's notion of comedy includes a strong tinge of sentimentality, although, at the same time, his earliest creative endeavors are all directed toward burlesque and social satire.

A detailed critical analysis of the theories expressed by Meredith in his Essay on Comedy and The Uses of the Comic Spirit shows him to be fully aware of the importance of a proper atmosphere and background for the special kind of intellectual comedy that he favors. He stresses particularly the necessity for social and intellectual equality between the sexes, and cites as special foes of real comedy: (1) "agelasts" or Puritanical non-laughers, and (2) "hypergelasts" or the Bacchanalians who laugh too much and too senselessly. He also points out the uses of comedy as a corrective device against folly and excessive sentimentality and indicates that one of its main functions is the exposure of egoism, vanity, and all human weakness. In a particularly penetrating passage he draws a sharp distinction between comedy on the one hand and satire, irony, and humor on the other. Finally he states the ultimate individual test for the perception of the comic to be the ability to detect ridicule without losing a sense of proportion, and he praises highly the power of

comedy to promote sanity by means of what he calls "healthy, thoughtful laughter of the mind."

Although Meredith's Essay is dated 1877, midway in his writing career, it offers interesting proof of a preoccupation with the subject which may be traced throughout his entire creative career. Beginning with his first period of experimentation, we find that The Shaving of Shagpat and Richard Feverel both show groping attempts to put into practice some kind of abstract theory of comedy, Shagpat as pure burlesque and farce, and Richard Feverel as a serious attempt to exhibit comic weaknesses that grow out of a ridiculous and impossible system of education. Steadily and gradually Meredith grows in power and stature, and in Evan Harrington, Sandra Belloni, Rhoda Fleming, and Vittoria, we find him definitely concerned with attacking sentimental snobbery and dwelling lovingly on its more comical aspects.

His third creative period concentrates especially on exposing sentimental egoism. The Adventures of Harry Richmond is a superbly hilarious attack on the sentimental egoist. Beauchamp's Career carries on the same theme with special emphasis on the comic side of political futilities, and in The Egoist Meredith gives us his supreme expression of his comic credo. The short stories and The Tragic Comedians show some slight falling off in power, but they are pale only by comparison to the masterpiece which immediately precedes them.

His final period is devoted to an increasing concern with problems of marriage, and in every case Meredith takes up the cudgels in defense of individuals who in some way defy the conventional aspects of marriage.

Diana of the Crossways, though much-admired and possibly the only really popular novel Meredith ever achieves, is really far from convincing in its labored efforts to make a heroine out of the misguided Diana. In spite of himself, Meredith, perhaps subconsciously, reveals realistically that Diana is no more nor less than a comic character. The last three novels, One of Our Conquerors, Lord Ormont and His Aminta, and The Amazing Marriage are all directly concerned with the difficulties attendant upon mismatings and consequent attempts to straighten out the entanglements. In each case Meredith frowns on conventionality, and upholds the decency and dignity of honest individual unconventionality. The comic thesis prevails vigorously in all these novels and proves conclusively that Meredith's creative fiction gives full and free expression to the theories of comedy that he elaborates with so much care in his Essay.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
OF
SERENA GOSS HALL

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

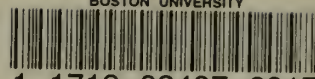
I was born in Haverhill, Massachusetts on November 14, 1900 and was given the name of Serena Goss Hall by my parents, Fred Oscar Hall and Clara Goss Hall. My secondary education was gained in the public schools of my native city, and after completing my high school course, I entered Boston University as a freshman in the College of Liberal Arts in the fall of 1919. I completed my undergraduate work in three and a half years, receiving my A.B. degree in 1923. One year later, in 1924, I acquired my degree of M.A. from the Graduate School of Boston University.

My first teaching position was in the English Department at the University of Illinois where I remained for six years, from 1924-1930. In the summer of 1930 I taught for six weeks in the Southern Illinois State Normal School at Carbondale, Illinois. Since the fall of 1930 I have been teaching English Literature and Composition at Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut.

PHOTOGRAPH OF CANDIDATE

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